

An-Astrologers-Day-and-Other



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AN ASTROLOGER'S DAY

and other stories

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AN ASTROLOGER'S DAY

PUNCTUALLY

at midday he opened his bag and

spread out his professional equipment, which consisted of a dozen cowrie shells, a square piece of cloth with obscure mystic charts on it, a notebook, and a bundle of palmyra writing. His forehead was resplendent with sacred ash and vermilion, and his eyes sparkled with a sharp abnormal gleam which was really an outcome of a continual searching look for customers, but which his simple clients took to be a prophetic light and felt comforted. The power of his eyes was considerably enhanced by their position placed as they were between the painted forehead and the dark whiskers which streamed down his cheeks : even a half-wit's eyes would sparkle in such a setting. To crown the effect he wound a saffron-coloured turban around his head. This colour scheme never failed.

People were attracted to him as bees are attracted to cosmos or dahlia stalks. He sat under the boughs of a spreading tamarind tree which flanked a path running through the Town Hall Park. It was a remarkable place in many ways : a surging crowd was always moving up and down this narrow road morning till night* A variety of trades and occupations was represented all along its way : medicine sellers, sellers 2 AN ASTROLOGER'S DAY

of stolen hardware and junk, magicians, and, above all, an auctioneer of cheap doth, who created enough din all day to attract the whole town. Next to him in vociferousness came a vendor of fried groundnut, who gave his ware a fancy name each day, calling it “

Bombay Ice-Cream ” one day, and on the next “

Delhi Almond,” and on the third

“

Raja's Delicacy,"

and so on and so forth, and people flocked to him. A considerable portion of this crowd dallied before the astrologer too. The astrologer transacted his business by the light of a flare which crackled and smoked up above the groundnut heap nearby. Half the enchant*

ment of the place was due to the fact that it did not have the benefit of municipal lighting. The place was lit up by shop lights. One or two had hissing gaslights, some had naked flares stuck on poles, some were lit up by old cycle lamps, and one or two, like the astrologer's, managed without lights of their own. It was a bewildering criss-cross of light rays and moving shadows.

This suited the astrologer very well, for the simple reason that he had not in the least intended to be an astrologer when he began life ; and he knew no more of what was going to happen to others than he knew what was going to happen to himself next minute. He was as much a stranger to the stars as were his innocent customers. Yet he said things which pleased and astonished everyone : that was more a matter of study, practice, and shrewd guesswork. All the same, it was as much an honest man's labour as any other, and he deserved the wages he carried home at the end of a day.

He had left his village without any previous thought or plan. If he had continued there he would have carried on the work of his forefathers namely, tilling the land, living, marrying, and ripening in his cornfield

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and ancestral home. But that was not to be. He had to leave home without telling anyone, and he could not rest till he left it behind a couple of hundred miles.

To a villager it is a great deal, as if an ocean flowed between.

He had a working analysis of mankind's troubles : marriage, money, and the tangles of human ties. Long practice had sharpened his perception. Within five minutes he understood what was wrong. He charged three pies per question, never opened his mouth till the other had spoken for at least ten minutes, which provided him enough stuff for a dozen answers and advices. When he told the person before him, gazing at his palm,

" In many ways you are not getting the fullest results for your efforts," nine out

of ten were disposed to agree with him. Or he questioned : “

Is

there any woman in your family, maybe even a distant relative, who is not well disposed towards you ?

” Or

he gave an analysis of character : ” Most of your

troubles are due to your nature. How can you be otherwise with Saturn where he is ? You have an impetuous nature and a rough exterior.” This endeared him to their hearts immediately, for; even the mildest of us loves to think that he has a forbidding exterior.

The nuts vendor blew out his flare and rose to go home. This was a signal for the astrologer to bundle up too, since it left him in darkness except for a little shaft of green light which strayed in from somewhere and touched the ground before him. He picked up his cowrie shells and paraphernalia and was putting them back into his bag when the green shaft of light was blotted out ; he looked up and saw a man standing before him. He sensed a possible client and said : 4 AN
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” You look so careworn. It will do you good to sit down for a while and chat with me.” The other grumbled some reply vaguely. The astrologer pressed his invitation ; whereupon the other thrust his palm under his nose, saying :

” You call yourself an

astrologer ?

” The astrologer felt challenged and said, tilting the other’s palm towards the green shaft of light :

” Yours is a nature ...”

“

Oh, stop that,”

the other said.

“

Tell me something worth while... .”

Our friend felt piqued.

“

I charge only three pies

per question, and what you get ought to be good enough for your money... .” At this the other withdrew his arm, took out an anna, and flung it out to him, saying : “

I have some questions to ask. If I prove you are bluffing, you must return that anna to me with interest.”

“

If you find my answers satisfactory, will you give me five rupees ?

“

” No.”

” Or will you give me eight annas ?

“

“

All right, provided you give me twice as much if you are wrong,” said the stranger. This pact was accepted after a little further argument. The astrologer sent up a prayer to heaven as the other lit a cheroot.

The astrologer caught a glimpse of his face by the matchlight. There was a pause as cars hooted on the road and rickshaw drivers swore at their horses, and the babble of the crowd agitated the semi-darkness of the park.

The other sat down, sucking his cheroot, puffing out, sat there ruthlessly. The astrologer felt very uncomfortable.

“

Here, take your anna back. I am not used to such challenges. It is late for me today... .”

He made preparations to bundle up. The other held his wrist and said :

” You can’t get out of it now. You AN ASTROLOGER’S DAY 5

dragged me in while I was passing.” The astrologer shivered in his grip ; and his voice shook and became faint.

” Leave me today. I will speak to you tomorrow.”

The other thrust his palm in his face and said :

“

Challenge is challenge. Go on.” The astrologer proceeded with his throat drying up : ” There

is a woman ...”

“

Stop,” said the other.

“

I don’t want all that.

Shall I succeed in my present search or not ? Answer this and go. Otherwise I will not let you go till you disgorge all your coins.” The astrologer muttered a few incantations and replied :

“

All right. I will

“speak. But will you give me a rupee if what I say is convincing ? Otherwise I will not open my mouth, and you may do what you like.” After a good deal of haggling the other agreed. The astrologer said : ” You were left for dead. Am I right ?

“

“

Ah, tell me more.”

” A knife has passed through you once ?

“

said the

astrologer.

” Good fellow !

” He bared his chest to show the

scar. “What else?”

” And then you were pushed into a well nearby in the field. You were left for dead.”

“

I should have been dead if some passer-by had not chanced to peep into the well,” exclaimed the other, overwhelmed by enthusiasm.

” When shall I get at

him ?

” he asked, clenching his fist.

” In the next world,” answered the astrologer.

” He

died four months ago in a far-off town. You will never see any more of him.”
The other groaned on hearing it. The astrologer proceeded :

” Guru Nayak

“

” You know my name !

“

the other said, taken aback.

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” As I know all other things. Guru Nayak, listen carefully to what I have to say. Your village is two day’s journey due north of this town. Take the next train and be gone. I see once again great danger to your life if you go from home.” He took out a pinch of sacred ash and held it to him. ” Rub it on your forehead and go home. Never travel southward again, and you will live to be a hundred.”

” Why should I leave home again ?

“

the other said

reflectively.

“

I was only going away now and then to look for him and to choke out his life if I met him.”

He shook his head regretfully.

” He has escaped my
hands. I hope at least he died as he deserved.”

“

Yes,” said the astrologer.

” He was crushed under
a lorry.” The other looked gratified to hear it.

The place was deserted by the time the astrologer picked up his articles and put them into his bag. The green shaft was also gone, leaving the place in darkness and silence. The stranger had gone off into the night, after giving the astrologer a

handful of coins.

It was nearly midnight when the astrologer reached home. His wife was waiting for him at the door and demanded an explanation. He flung the coins at her and said :

” Count them. One man gave all that.”

“Twelve and a half annas,” she said, counting. She was overjoyed.

“

I can buy some jaggery and coconut tomorrow. The child has been asking for sweets for so many days now. I will prepare some nice stuff for her.”

” The swine has cheated me ! He promised me a rupee,” said the astrologer. She looked up at him.

” You look worried. What is wrong ?

“

“

Nothing.”

After dinner, sitting on the pyol, he told her : ” Do

you know a great load is gone from me today? I AN ASTROLOGER’S DAY 7

thought I had the blood of a man on my hands all these years. That was the reason why I ran away from home, settled here, and married you. He is alive.”

She gasped.

” You tried to kill !

“

“

Yes, in our village, when I was a silly youngster.

We drank, gambled, and quarrelled badly one day why think of it now ? Time to sleep,” he said, yawning, and stretched himself on the pyol.

2

THE MISSING MAIL

THOUGH his beat covered Vinayak Mudali Street and its four parallel roads, it took him nearly six hours before he finished his round and returned to the head office in Market Road to deliver accounts. He allowed himself to get mixed up with the fortunes of the persons to whom he was carrying letters. At No.

13, Kabir Street, lived the man who had come halfway up the road to ask for a letter for so many years now.

Thanappa had seen him as a youngster, and had watched him day by day greying on the pial, sitting there and hoping for a big prize to come his way through solving crossword puzzles.

” No prize yet,” he

announced to him every day.

” But don’t be disheartened.”

” Your interest has been delayed this month somehow,” he said to another.

” Your son at

Hyderabad has written again, madam. How many children has he now ?

” “I did not know that you

had applied for this Madras job ; you haven’t cared to tell me ! It doesn’t matter. When I bring you your appointment order you must feed me with coconut payasam” And at each of these places he stopped for nearly half an hour. Especially if anyone received money orders, he just settled down quite nicely, with his bags and bundles spread about him, and would not rise till he gathered

an idea of how and where every rupee was going. If it was a hot day he sometimes 8

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asked for a tumbler of buttermilk and sat down to enjoy it. Everybody liked him on his beat. He was a part and parcel of their existence, their hopes, aspirations, and activities.

Of all his contacts, the one with which he was most intimately bound up was No. 10, Vinayak Mudali Street. Ramanujam was a senior clerk in the Revenue Division Office, and Thanappa had carried letters to that address for over a generation now. His earliest association with Ramanujam was years and years ago.

Ramanujam's wife was away in the village. A card arrived for Ramanujam. Thanappa, as was his custom, glanced through it at the sorting table itself ; and, the moment they were ready to start out, went straight to Vinayak Mudali Street, though in the ordinary course over 150 addresses preceded it. He went straight to Ramanujam's house, knocked on the door and shouted :

“

Postman, sir, postman.” When

Ramanujam opened it, he said :

” Give me a handful

of sugar before I give you this card. Happy father !

After all these years of prayers ! Don't complain that it is a daughter. Daughters are God's gift, you know.

... Kamakshi lovely name !

“

“

Kamakshi,” he addressed the tall, bashful girl, years later,

“

get your photo ready. Ah, so shy !

Here is your grandfather’s card asking for your photo.

Why should he want it, unless it be ...”

” The old gentleman writes rather frequently now, doesn’t he, sir ?

” he asked Ramanujam, as he handed him his letter and waited for him to open the envelope and go through its contents. Ramanujam looked worried after reading it. The postman asked : “

I

hope it’s good news ?

” He leaned against the veranda

io THE MISSING MAIL

pillar, with a stack of undelivered letters still under his arm. Ramanujam said :

” My father-in-law thinks I

am not sufficiently active in finding a husband for my daughter. He has tried one or two places and failed.

He thinks I am very indifferent... .”

“

Elderly

people have their own anxiety,” the postman replied.

” The trouble is,” said Ramanujam, “

that he has set

apart five thousand rupees for this girl's marriage and is worrying me to find a husband for her immediately.

But money is not everything... .”

“

No, no,”

echoed the postman ;

“

unless the destined hour is at

hand, nothing can help... .”

Day after day for months Thanappa delivered the letters and waited to be told the news : ” Same old

news, Thanappa... . Horoscopes do not agree... .

They are demanding too much... . Evidently they, do not approve of her appearance.”

“

Appearance !

She looks like a queen. Unless one is totally blind ...” the postman retorted angrily. The season would be closing, with only three more auspicious dates, the last being May 20th. The girl would be seventeen in a few days. The reminders from her grandfather were becoming fiercer. Ramanujam had exhausted all the possibilities and had drawn a blank everywhere.

He looked helpless and miserable.

“

Postman,” he

said,

“

I don’t think there is a son-in-law for me anywhere... .”

“

Oh, don’t utter inauspicious words, sir,” the postman said.

” When God wills it ...” He reflected for a while and said :

” There is a boy in Delhi earning two hundred rupees. Makunda of Temple Street was after him. Makunda and you are of the same subcaste, I believe ...”

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“

They have been negotiating for months now.

Over a hundred letters have passed between them already... . But I know they are definitely breaking off. ... It is over some money question... . They have written their last message on a postcard and it has infuriated these people all the more. As if postcards were an instrument of insult ! I have known most important communications being written even on picture postcards ; when Rajappa went to America two years ago he used to write to his sons every week on picture postcards. ...” After this digression he came back to the point.

“

I will ask Makunda to give

me the horoscope. Let us see... .” Next day he brought the horoscope with him.

” The boy’s parents are also in Delhi, so you can write to them immediately.

No time to waste now.”

A ray of hope touched Ramanujam’s family.

“

I have still a hundred letters to deliver, but I came here first because I saw this Delhi postmark... .

Open it and tell me what they have written,” said Thanappa. He trembled with suspense.

” How

prompt these people are ! So they approve of the photo ! Who wouldn't ?

” “A letter every day ! I

might as well apply for leave till Kamakshi's marriage is over ...” he said another day.

” You are already

talking as if it were coming off tomorrow ! God knows how many hurdles we have to cross now. Liking a photo does not prove anything... .”

The family council was discussing an important question : whether Ramanujam should go to Madras, taking the girl with him, and meet the party, who could come down for a day from Delhi. The family was divided over the question. Ramanujam, his mother, and his wife none of them had defined views on the 12
THE MISSING MAIL

question, but yet they opposed each other vehemently.

” We shall be the laughing-stock of the town,” said Ramanujam's wife,

“

if we take the girl out to be shown round... .”

” What queer notions ! If you stand on all these absurd antiquated formalities, we shall never get anywhere near a marriage. It is our duty to take the girl over even to Delhi if necessary... .”

“

It is your

pleasure, then ; you can do what you please ; why consult me ? ...”

Tempers were at their worst, and no progress seemed possible. Time was marching. The postman had got into the habit of dropping in at the end of his day’s work, and joining in the council.

“

I am a third party.

Listen to me,” he said.

“

Sir, please take the train to

Madras immediately. What you cannot achieve by a year’s correspondence you can do in an hour’s meeting.”

” Here is a letter from Madras, madam. I am sure it is from your husband. What is the news ?

” He

handed the cover to Ramanujam’s wife, and she took it in to read. He said :

“

I have some registered

letters for those last houses. I will finish my round, and come back... .” He returned as promised.

” Have they met, madam ?

“

“

Yes, Kamakshi's father has written that they have met the girl, and from their talk Kamakshi's father infers they are quite willing... .”

” Grand news ! I will offer a coconut to our Vinayaka tonight.”

“But,” the lady added, half overwhelmed with happiness and half worried,

“

there is this difficulty.

We had an idea of doing it during next Thai month.

... It will be so difficult to hurry through the arrangements now. But they say that if the marriage

is done it must be done on the twentieth of May. If it is postponed the boy can't marry for three years.

He is being sent away for some training... .”

” The old gentleman is as good as his word/’ the postman said, delivering an insurance cover to Ramanujam.

” He has given the entire amount. You can't complain of lack of funds now. Go ahead. I'm so happy you have his approval. More than their money, we need their blessings, sir. I hope he has sent his heartiest blessings... .”

” Oh yes, oh yes,” replied

Ramanujam,

” My father-in-law seems to be very happy at this proposal... .”

A five-thousand-rupee marriage was a big affair for Malgudi. Ramanujam, with so short a time before him, and none to share the task of arrangements, became distraught. As far as it could go, Thanappa placed himself at his service during all his off hours. He cut short his eloquence, advices, and exchanges in other houses. He never waited for anyone to come up and receive the letters. He just tossed them through a window or an open door with a stentorian “

Letter,

sir.” If they stopped him and asked : ” What is the matter with you ? In such a hurry !

“

,

“

Yes, leave

me alone till the twentieth of May. I will come and squat in your house after that ” and he was off.

Ramanujam was in great tension. He trembled with anxiety as the day approached nearer.

“

It must go

on smoothly. Nothing should prove a hindrance.”

” Do not worry, sir ; it will go through happily, by God’s grace. You have given them everything they wanted in cash, presents, and style. They are good people... .”

“

It is not about that. It is the very last date for the year. If for some reason some obstruction comes up, i4 THE MISSING MAIL

it is all finished for ever. The boy goes away for three years. I don’t think either of us would be prepared to bind ourselves to wait for three years.”

It was four hours past the Muhurtam on the day of the wedding. A quiet had descended on the gathering.

The young smart bridegroom from Delhi was seated in a chair under the pandal. Fragrance of sandal, and flowers, and holy smoke, hung about the air. People were sitting around the bridegroom talking. Thanappa appeared at the gate loaded with letters. Some young men ran up to him demanding :

” Postman !

Letters ?

” He held them off.

” Get back. I know

to whom to deliver.” He walked up to the bridegroom and held up to him a bundle of letters very respectfully.

” These are all greetings and blessings from wellwishers, I believe, sir, and my own go with every one of them... .” He seemed very proud of performing this task, and looked very serious. The bridegroom looked up at him with an amused smile and muttered : ” Thanks.” ” We are all very proud to have your distinguished self as a son-in-law of this house. I have known that child, Kamakshi, ever since she was a day old, and I knew she would always get a distinguished husband,” added the postman, and brought his palms together in a salute, and moved into the house to deliver other letters and to refresh himself in the kitchen with tiffin and coffee.

Ten days later he knocked on the door and, with a grin, handed Kamakshi her first letter : “

Ah, scented

envelope ! I knew it was coming when the mail van was three stations away. I have seen hundreds like this. Take it from me. Before he has written the tenth letter he will command you to pack up and join him, and you will grow a couple of wings and fly away

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that very day, and forget for ever Thanappa and this street, isn't it so ?

” Kamakshi blushed, snatched the

letter from his hands, and ran in to read it. He said, turning away :

“

I don't think there is any use waiting for you to finish the letter and tell me its contents.”

On a holiday, when he was sure Ramanujam would be at home, Thanappa knocked on the door and handed him a card.

” Ah !

“

cried Ramanujam.

” Bad

news, Thanappa. My uncle, my father's brother, is very ill in Salem, and they want me to start immediately.”

” I'm very sorry to hear it, sir,” said Thanappa, and handed him a telegram.

“

Here's another... .”

Ramanujam cried :

” A telegram !

” He glanced

at it and screamed :

“

Oh, he is dead !

” He sat down

on the pial, unable to stand the shock. Thanappa looked equally miserable. Ramanujam rallied, gathered himself up, and turned to go in. Thanappa said :

” One moment, sir. I have a confession to make. See the date on the card.”

“

May the nineteenth, nearly fifteen days ago !

“

“

Yes, sir, and the telegram followed next day that is, on the day of the marriage. I was unhappy to see it. ... c But what has happened has happened,’ I said to myself, and kept it away, fearing that it might interfere with the wedding... .”

Ramanujam glared at the postman and said : “

I

would not have cared to go through the marriage when he was dying... .” The postman stood with bowed head and mumbled :

” You can complain if you like,

sir. They will dismiss me. It is a serious offence.”

He turned and descended the steps and went down the street on his rounds. Ramanujam watched him dully for a while and shouted :

” Postman !

“

Thanappa

i6 THE MISSING MAIL

turned round ; Ramanujam cried :

” Don’t think that

I intend to complain. I am only sorry you have done this... ,”

“

I understand your feelings, sir,” replied the postman, disappearing around a bend.

3

THE DOCTOR’S WORD

PEOPLE

came to him when the patient was on his last legs. Dr. Raman often burst out, ”
Why

couldn’t you have come a day earlier ?

” The reason

was obvious visiting fee twentyfive rupees, and more than that people liked to shirk the fact that the time had come to call in Dr. Raman ; for them there was something ominous in the very association. As a result when the big man came on the scene it was always a quick decision one way or another. There was no scope or time for any kind of wavering or whitewashing.

Long years of practice of this kind had bred in the doctor a certain curt truthfulness ; for that very reason his opinion was valued ; he was not a mere doctor expressing an opinion but a judge pronouncing a verdict. The patient’s life hung on his words. This never unduly worried Dr. Raman. He never believed that agreeable words ever saved lives. He did not think it was any of his business to provide unnecessary dope when as a matter of course Nature would teU

them the truth in a few hours. However, when he glimpsed the faintest sign of hope, he rolled up his sleeve and stepped into the arena : it might be hours or days, but he never withdrew till he wrested the prize from Tama's hands.

Today, standing over a bed, the doctor felt that he himself needed someone to tell him soothing lies. He mopped his brow with his kerchief and sat down in i8 THE DOCTOR'S WORD

the chair beside the bed. On the bed lay his dearest friend in the world : Gopal. They had known each other for forty years now, starting with their Kindergarten days. They could not, of course, meet as much as they wanted, each being wrapped in his own family and profession. Occasionally, on a Sunday, Gopal would walk into the consulting room, and wait patiently in a corner till the doctor was free. And then they would dine together, see a picture, and talk of each other's life and activities. It was a classic friendship standing over, untouched by changing times, circumstances, and activities.

In his busy round of work, Dr. Raman had not noticed that Gopal had not called in for over three months now. He just remembered it when he saw GopaPs son sitting on a bench in the consulting hall, one crowded morning. Dr. Raman could not talk to him for over an hour. When he got up and was about to pass on to the operation room, he called up the young man and asked,

" What brings you here, sir ?

"

The youth was nervous and shy.

" Mother sent

me here."

" What can I do for you ?

"

"

Father is iU ..."

It was an operation day and he was not free till three in the afternoon. He rushed off straight from the clinic to his friend's house, in Lawley Extension.

Gopal lay in bed as if in sleep. The doctor stood over him and asked Gopal's wife,

"How long has he

been in bed ?

"

"A month and a half, doctor."

"Who is attending him ?

"

"A doctor in the next street. He comes down once in three days and gives him medicine."

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"What is his name ?

"He had never heard of

him.

"Someone I don't know, but I wish he had had the goodness to tell me about it. Why, why, couldn't you have sent me word earlier ?

"

"We thought you would be busy and did not wish to trouble you unnecessarily." They were apologetic and miserable. There was hardly any time to be lost.

He took off his coat and opened his bag. He took out an injection tube, the needle sizzled over the stove.

The sick man's wife whimpered in a corner and essayed to ask questions.

“

Please don't ask questions,” snapped the doctor.

He looked at the children who were watching the sterilizer, and said,

” Send them all away somewhere,

except the eldest.”

He shot in the drug, sat back in his chair, and gazed on the patient's face for over an hour. The patient still remained motionless. The doctor's face gleamed with perspiration, and his eyelids drooped with fatigue. The sick man's wife stood in a corner and watched silently. She asked timidly, “

Doctor,

shall I make some coffee for you ?

” “

No,” he

replied, although he felt famished, having missed his midday meal. He got up and said,

“

I will be back

in a few minutes. Don't disturb him on any account.”

He picked up his bag and went to his car. In a quarter of an hour he was back, followed by an assistant and a nurse. The doctor told the lady of the house, “

I have to perform an operation.”

“

Why, why ? Why ?

“

she asked faintly.

“

I will tell you all that soon. Will you leave your son here to help us, and go over to the next house and stay there till I call you ?

“

The lady felt giddy and sank down on the floor, as THE DOCTOR'S WORD
unable to bear the strain. The nurse attended to her and led her out.

At about eight in the evening the patient opened his eyes and stirred slightly in bed. The assistant was overjoyed. He exclaimed enthusiastically, “

Sir, he

will pull through.” The doctor looked at him coldly and whispered :

“

I would give anything to see him

through but, but the heart ...”

” The pulse has improved, Sir.”

“

Well, well,” replied the doctor.

” Don't trust it.

It is only a false flash-up, very common in these cases.” He ruminated for a while and added, “

If

the pulse will keep up till eight in the morning, it will go on for the next forty years, but I doubt very much if we shall see anything of it at all after two tonight.”

He sent away the assistant and sat beside the patient.

At about eleven the patient opened his eyes and smiled at his friend. He showed a slight improvement, he was able to take in a little food. A great feeling of relief and joy went through the household. They swarmed around the doctor and poured out their gratitude. He sat in his seat beside the bed, gazing sternly at the patient’s face, hardly showing any signs of hearing what they were saying to him. The sick man’s wife asked,

“

Is he now out of danger ?

“

Without turning his head the doctor said, ” Give

glucose and brandy every forty minutes ; just a couple of spoons will do.” The lady went away to the kitchen.

She felt restless. She felt she must know the truth whatever it was. Why was the great man so evasive ?

The suspense was unbearable. Perhaps he could not speak so near the patient’s bed. She beckoned to him from the kitchen doorway. The doctor rose and went
THE DOCTOR’S WORD 21

over. She asked,

” What about him now ? How is

he ?

” The doctor bit his lips and replied, looking at the floor,

” Don’t get excited. Unless you must know about it, don’t ask now.” Her eyes

opened wide in terror. She clasped her hands together and implored :

“

Tell me the truth.” The doctor replied, “

I would rather not talk to you now.” He turned round and went back to his chair. A terrible wailing shot through the still house ; the patient stirred and looked about in bewilderment. The doctor got up again, went over to the kitchen door, drew it in securely and shut off the wail.

When the doctor resumed his seat the patient asked in the faintest whisper possible, “

Is that someone

crying ?

” The doctor advised,

“

Don’t exert your*

self. You mustn’t talk.” He felt the pulse. It was already agitated by the exertion. The patient asked, ” Am I going ? Don’t hide it from me.” The doctor made a deprecating noise and sat back in his chair.

He had never faced a situation like this. It was not in his nature to whitewash. People attached great value to his word because of that. He stole a look at the other. The patient motioned a finger to draw him nearer and whispered,

“

I must know how long I

am going to last. I must sign the will. It is all ready.

Ask my wife for the despatch box. You must sign as a witness.”

” Oh !

“

the doctor exclaimed.

” You are exerting

yourself too much. You must be quieter.” He felt idiotic to be repeating it.

” How fine it would be,”

he reflected,

“

to drop the whole business and run away somewhere without answering anybody any question !

” The patient clutched the doctor’s wrist with his weak fingers and said,

“

Ramu, it is my good

M THE DOCTOR’S WORD

fortune that you are here at this moment. I can trust your word. I can’t leave my property unsettled.

That will mean endless misery for my wife and children.

You know all about Subbiah and his gang. Let me sign before it is too late. Tell me... .”

“

Yes, presently,” replied the doctor. He walked off to his car, sat in the back seat and reflected. He looked at his watch. Midnight. If the will was to be signed, it must be done within the next two hours, or never. He could not be responsible for a mess there ; he knew too well the family affairs and about those wolves, Subbiah and his gang ... But what could he do ? If he asked him to sign the Will, it would virtually mean a death sentence and destroy the thousandth part of a

chance that the patient had of survival. He got down from the car and went in.

He resumed his seat in the chair. The patient was staring at him appealingly. The doctor said to himself, “

If my word can save his life, he shall not die.

The will be damned.” He called,

“

Gopal, listen.”

This was the first time he was going to do a piece of acting before a patient, simulate a feeling, and conceal his judgment. He stooped over the patient and said with deliberate emphasis,

” Don’t worry about the

will now. You are going to live. Your heart is absolutely sound.” A new glow suffused the patient’s face as he heard it. He asked in a tone of relief, ” Do

you say so ? If it comes from your lips it must be true ...”

The doctor said,

“

Quite right. You are improving

every second. Sleep in peace. You must not exert yourself on any account. You must sleep very soundly.

I will see you in the morning.” The patient looked at him gratefully for a moment and then closed his eyes.

THE DOCTOR’S WORD 23

The doctor picked up his bag and went out shutting the door softly behind him.

On his way home he stopped for a moment at his hospital, called out his

assistant, and said, " That

Lawley Extension case. You might expect the collapse any second now. Go there with a tube of ... in hand, and give it in case the struggle is too hard at the end. Hurry up/'

Next morning he was back at Lawley Extension at ten. From his car he made a dash for the sick bed.

The patient was awake and looked very well. The assistant reported satisfactory pulse. The doctor put his tube at his heart, listened for a while, and told the sick man's wife,

" Don't look so unhappy, lady. Your husband will live to be ninety." When they were going back to the hospital, the assistant sitting beside him in the car asked,

"

Is he going to live, sir ?

"

"

I will bet on it. He will live to be ninety. He has turned the corner. How he has survived this attack will be a puzzle to me all my life," replied the doctor.

4

GATEMAN'S GIFT

11A7HEN a dozen persons question openly or slyly VV a man's sanity, he begins to entertain serious doubts himself. This is what happened to ex-gateman Govind Singh. And you could not blame the public either. What could you do with a man who carried about in his hand a registered postal cover and asked : "

Please tell me what there is inside ?

" The obvious

answer was :

“

Open it and see ...” He seemed

horrified at this suggestion.

“

Oh, no, no, can't do

it,” he declared and moved off to another friend and acquaintance. Everywhere the suggestion was the same till he thought everyone had turned mad. And then somebody said :

“

If you don't like to open it and

yet want to know what is inside you must take it to the X-ray Institute.” This was suggested by an ex-compounder who lived in the next street.

“What is it?” asked Govind Singh. It was explained to him. ” Where is it ?

” He was directed

to the City X-ray Institute.

But before saying anything further about his progress, it would be usefiil to go back to an earlier chapter in his history. After war service in 1914-18, he came to be recommended for a gatekeeper's post at Engladia's. He liked the job very much. He was given a khaki uniform, a resplendent band across his shoulder and a short stick. He gripped the stick and 24

GATEMAN'S GIFT 25

sat down on a stool at the entrance to the office. And when his chief's car pulled up at the gate he stood at attention and gave a military salute. The office consisted of a staff numbering over a hundred and as they trooped in and out every day he kept an eye on them. At the end of the day he awaited the footsteps of the General Manager coining down the stairs and rose stiffly and stood at

attention, and after he left the hundreds of staff poured out. The doors were shut ; Singh carried his stool in, placed it under the staircase, and placed his stick across it. Then he came out and the main door was locked and sealed. In this way he had spent twentyfive years of service, and then he begged to be pensioned off. He would not have thought of retirement yet, but for the fact that he found his sight and hearing playing tricks on him ; he could not catch the Manager's footsteps on the stairs, and it was hard to recognize him even at ten yards. He was ushered into the presence of the chief, who looked up for a moment from his papers and muttered :

” We are very pleased with your work for us, and the company will give you a pension of twelve rupees for your life ...” Singh clicked his heels, saluted, turned on his heel and went out of the room, with his heart brimming with gratitude and pride.

This was the second occasion when the great man had spoken to him, the first being on the first day of his service. As he had stood at his post, the chief, entering the office just then, looked up for a moment and asked ” Who are you ?

“

” I'm the new gatekeeper, master,” he had answered.

And he spoke again only on this day. Though so little was said, Singh felt electrified on both occasions by the words of his master. In Singh's eyes 26
GATEMAN'S GIFT

the chief had acquired a sort of Godhood, and it would be quite adequate if a god spoke to one only once or twice in a lifetime. In moments of contemplation Singh's mind dwelt on the words of his master, and on his personality.

His life moved on smoothly. The pension together with what his wife earned by washing and sweeping in a couple of houses was quite sufficient for him. He ate his food, went out and met a few friends, slept, and spent some evenings sitting at a cigarette shop which his cousin owned. This tenor of life was disturbed on the first of every month when he donned his old khaki suit, walked to his old office, and salaamed the Accountant at the counter and received his pension.

Sometimes if it was closing he waited on the roadside for the General Manager to come down, and saluted him as he got into his car.

There was a lot of time all around him, an immense sea of leisure. In this state he made a new discovery about himself, that he could make fascinating models out of clay and wood dust. The discovery came suddenly, when one day a child in the neighbourhood brought to him its little doll for repair. He not only repaired it but made a new thing of it. This discovery pleased him so much that he very soon became absorbed in it. His backyard gave him a plentiful supply of pliant clay, and the carpenter's shop next to his cousin's cigarette shop sawdust. He purchased paint for a few annas. And lo ! he found his hours gliding. He sat there in the front part of his home, bent over his clay, and brought into existence a miniature universe ; all the colours of life were there, all the forms and creatures, but of the size of his middle finger ; whole villages and towns were there, GATEMAN'S GIFT 27

all the persons he had seen passing before his office when he was sentry there that beggar woman coming at midday, and that cucumber vendor ; he had the eye of a cartoonist for human faces. Everything went down into clay. It was a wonderful miniature reflection of the world ; and he mounted them neatly on thin wooden slices, which enhanced their attractiveness.

He kept these in his cousin's shop and they attracted huge crowds every day and sold very briskly.

More than the sales Singh felt an ecstasy when he saw admiring crowds clustering around his handiwork.

On his next pension day he carried to his office a street scene (which he ranked as his best), and handed it over the counter to the Accountant with the request : " Give this to the Sahib, please !

"

"

All right,*' said the Accountant with a smile. It created a sensation in the office and disturbed the routine of office working for nearly half an hour. On the next pension day he carried another model (children at play) and handed it over the counter.

" Did Sahib like the last one ?

“

“Yes, he liked it.”

“

Please give this one to him ” and he passed it over the counter. He made it a convention to carry on every pension day an offering for his master, and each time his greatest reward was the Accountant’s stock reply to his question :

” What did the Sahib

say ?

“

” He said it was very good.”

At last he made his masterpiece. A model of his office frontage with himself at his post, a car at the entrance, and the chief getting down : this composite model was so realistic that while he sat looking at it, he seemed to be carried back to his office days. He 28 GATEMAN’S GIFT

passed it over the counter on his pension day and it created a very great sensation in the office.

“

Fellow,

you have not left yourself out, either !

“

people cried

and looked admiringly at Singh. A sudden fear seized Singh and he asked :

” The master won’t be angry,

I hope?” “

No, no, why should he be ?

“

said the Accountant,

and Singh received his pension and went home.

A week later when he was sitting on the fyol kneading clay, the postman came and said : ” A

registered letter for you ...”

” For me !

“

Any letter would have upset Singh ; he had received less than three letters in his lifetime, and each time it was a torture for him till the contents were read out. Now a registered letter ! This was his first registered letter.

“

Only lawyers send registered

letters, isn't it so ?

“

“

Usually,” said the postman.

Please take it back. I don't want it,” said Singh.

Shall I say ‘Refused’?” asked the postman.

“No, no,” said Singh. “Just take it back and say you have not found me ...”

” That I can't do ...” said the postman looking serious.

Singh seemed to have no option but to scrawl his signature and receive the packet. He sat gloomily gazing at the floor. His wife who had gone out and just returned saw him in this condition and asked : “What is it?” His voice choked as he replied : “It has come.” He flung at her the registered letter.

“What is it? “she asked. He said: “How should I know. Perhaps our ruin ...” He broke down.

His wife watched him for a moment, went in to attend to some domestic duty and returned, still found him c<

a

GATEMAN’S GIFT 29

in the same condition, and asked : ” Why not open

it and see, ask someone to read it ?

” He threw up his

arms in horror :

“

Woman, you don’t know what you

are saying. It cannot be opened. They have perhaps written that my pension is stopped, and God knows what else the Sahib has said ...”

” Why not go to the office and find out from them ?

“

” Not I ! I will never show my face there again ...” replied Singh.

“

I have lived without a single

remark being made against me, all my life. Now !

” He

shuddered at the thought of it.

“

I knew I was

getting into trouble when I made that office model ...” After deeper reflection he said : “

Every time

I took something there, people crowded round, stopped all work for nearly an hour ... That must also have reached the Sahib’s ears.”

He wandered about saying the same thing, with the letter in his pocket. He lost taste for food, wandered about unkempt, with his hair standing up like a halo an unaccustomed sight, his years in military service having given him a habitual tidiness. His wife lost all peace of mind and became miserable about him. He stood at the cross-roads, clutching the letter in his hand. He kept asking everyone he came across : “

Tell me, what there is in this ?

” but he would not

brook the suggestion to open it and see its contents.

So forthwith Singh found his way to the City X-ray Institute at Race Course Road. As he entered the gate he observed dozens of cars parked along the drive, and a Gurkha watchman at the gate. Some people were sitting on sofas reading books and journals.

They turned and threw a brief look at him and resumed their studies. As Singh stood uncertainly at the doorway, an assistant came up and asked : SO
GATEMAN’S GIFT

” What do you want ?

“

Singh gave a salute, held

up the letter uncertainly and muttered : ” Can I

know what is inside this ?

” The assistant made the

obvious suggestion. But Singh replied : “

They said

you could tell me what’s inside without opening it “

The assistant asked :

” Where do you come from ?

“

Singh explained his life, work and outlook and concluded :

“

I’ve lived without remark all my life. I knew trouble was coming

” There were tears on

his cheeks. The assistant looked at him curiously as scores of others had done before, smiled, and said : ” Go home and rest. You are not all right ... Go, go home.”

” Can’t you say what is in this ?

“

Singh asked

pathetically. The assistant took it in his hand, examined it and said :

“

Shall I open it ?

” “

No,

no, no,” Singh cried and snatched it back. There was a look of terror in his eyes. The assembly looked up from their pages and watched him with mild amusement in their eyes. The assistant kindly put his arms on his shoulder and led him out.

” You get well first,

and then come back. I tell you you are not all right.”

Walking back home, he pondered over it.

” Why

are they all behaving like this, as if I were a mad man ?

” When this word came to his mind, he stopped abruptly in the middle of the road, and cried : .”Oh! That’s it, is that it? Mad! Mad!” He shook his head gleefully as if the full truth had just dawned upon him. He now understood the looks that people threw at him. ” Oh ! oh !

” he cried aloud.

He laughed. He felt a curious relief at this realization.

“

I have been mad and didn’t know it ...” He cast his mind back. Every little action of his for the last GATEMAN’S GIFT 31

so many days seemed mad ; particularly the dollmaking.

” What sane man would make clay dolls after 25 years of respectable service in an office ?

” He

felt a tremendous freedom of limbs, and didn’t feel it possible to walk at an ordinary pace. He wanted to fly.

He swung his arms up and down and ran on with a whoop. He ran through the Market Road. When people stood about and watched he cried : “

Hey,

don’t laugh at a mad man, for who knows, you will also be mad when you come to make clay dolls,” and charged into their midst with a war cry. When he saw children coming out of a school, he felt it would be nice to amuse their young hearts by behaving like a tiger. So he fell on his hands and knees and crawled up to them with a growl.

He went home in a terrifying condition. His wife who was grinding chilly in the backyard looked up and asked :

” What is this ?

“

His hair was covered

with street dust ; his body was splashed with mud.

He could not answer because he choked with mirth as he said :

“

Fancy what has happened !

“

“What is it?”

” I’m mad, mad.” He looked at his work-basket in a corner, scooped out the clay and made a helmet of it and put it on his head. Ranged on the floor was his latest handiwork. After his last visit to the office he had been engaged in making a model village.

It was a resplendent group ; a dun road, red tiles, green coconut trees swaying, and the colour of the sarees of the village women carrying water pots. He derived the inspiration for it from a memory of his own village days. It was the most enjoyable piece of work that he had so far undertaken. He lived in a kind of ecstasy while doing it.

“

I am going to keep

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this for myself. A memento of my father's village,"

he declared.

“

I will show it at an exhibition, where they will give me a medal.’⁹ He guarded it like a treasure : when it was wet he never allowed his wife to walk within ten yards of it :

“

Keep off, we don't

want your foot dust for this village ...”

Now in his madness, he looked down on it. He raised his foot and stamped everything down into a multi-coloured jam. They were still half wet. He saw a donkey grazing in the street. He gathered up the jam and flung it at the donkey with the remark : ” Eat this if you like. It is a nice village ...” And he went out on a second round. This was a quieter outing. He strode on at an even pace, breathing deeply, with the clay helmet on, out of which peeped his grey hair, his arms locked behind, his fingers clutching the fateful letter, his face tilted towards the sky. He walked down the Market Road, with a feeling that he was the sole occupant of this globe : his madness had given him a sense of limitless freedom, strength and buoyancy. The remarks and jeers of the crowds gaping at him did not in the least touch him.

While he walked thus, his eye fell on the bulb of a tall street lamp :

” Bulb of the size of a Papaya fruit !

“

he muttered and chuckled. It had been a long cherished desire in him to fling a stone at it ; now he felt, in his joyous and free condition, that he was free from

the trammels of convention and need not push back any inclination. He picked up a pebble and threw it with good aim. The shattering noise of glass was as music to his ears. A policeman put his hand on his shoulder :

” Why did you do it ?

“

Singh

looked indignant :

“

I like to crack glass Papaya fruit, GATEMAN’S GIFT 33

that is all/

1 was the reply. The constable said : ” Come to the station.”

“

Oh, yes, when I was in Mesopotamia they put me on half ration once,” he said, and walked on to the station. He paused, tilted his head to the side and remarked :

” This road is not straight ...” A few carriages and cycles were coming up to him. He found that everything was wrong about them. They seemed to need some advice in the matter. He stopped in the middle of the road, stretched out his arms and shouted :

” Halt !

” The carriages stopped, the

cyclists jumped off and Singh began a lecture : ” When

I was in Mesopotamia I will tell you fellows who don’t know anything about anything.” The policeman dragged him away to the side, and waved to the traffic to resume. One of the cyclists who resumed, jumped off the saddle again and came towards him with :

” Why ! It is Singh, Singh, what fancy dress is this ? What is the matter ?

” Even through the

haze of his insane vision Singh could recognize the voice and the person the Accountant at the office.

Singh clicked his heels and gave a salute : “

Excuse

me sir, didn’t intend to stop you. You may pass ...”

He pointed the way generously, and the Accountant saw the letter in his hand. He recognized it although it was mud-stained and crumpled.

“

Singh, you got our letter ?

“

“

Yes, sir, Pass. Do not speak of it . , .”

” What is the matter ?

” He snatched it from his

hand. ” Why haven’t you opened it !

” He tore

open the envelope and took out of it a letter and read aloud :

” The General Manager greatly appreciates the very artistic models you have sent, and he is pleased to sanction a reward of Rs. 100 and hopes 34

GATEMAN’S GIFT

it will be an encouragement for you to keep up this interesting hobby.”

It was translated to him word for word, and the enclosure, a cheque for one hundred rupees, was handed to him. A big crowd gathered to watch this scene.

Singh pressed the letter to his eyes. He beat his brow, and wailed :

“

Tell me, sir, am I mad or not ?

“

” You look quite well, you aren’t mad,” said the Accountant. Singh fell at his feet and said with tears choking his voice :

” You are a god, sir, to say that I am not mad. I am so happy to hear it.”

On the next pension day he turned up spruce as ever at the office counter. As they handed him the envelope they asked :

” What toys are you making

now ?

“

“

Nothing sir. Never again. It is no occupation for a sane man ...” he said, received his pension, and stiffly walked out of the office.

5

THE ROMAN IMAGE

THE Talkative Man said :

Once I was an archaeologist’s assistant. I wandered up and down the country probing, exploring, and digging, in search of antiquities, a most interesting occupation, although cynics sometimes called us “

grave-diggers.” I enjoyed the work immensely. I had a master who was a famous

archaeologist called Doctor something or other. He was a superb, timeless being, who lived a thousand years behind the times, and who wanted neither food nor roof nor riches if only he was allowed to gaze on undisturbed at an old coin or chip of a burial urn.

He had torn up the earth in almost all parts of India and had brought to light very valuable information concerning the history and outlook of people of remote centuries. His monographs on each of his excavations filled several shelves in all the important libraries. And then, as our good fortune would have it, he received an inspiration that Malgudi district was eminently diggable. I am not competent to explain how he got this idea, but there it was. Word was brought to me that the great man was staying in the dak bungalow and was in need of an assistant.

Within an hour of hearing it I stood before the great man. He was sitting on the floor with the most crazy collection of articles in front of him pots and 35

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beads and useless coins and palm leaves, all of them rusty and decaying. He had a lens by his side, through which he looked at these articles and made notes. He asked me :

” What do you know of the
archaeological factors of your district ?

“

I blinked.

Honestly I didn't know there was any archaeology in our place. He looked at me through his old spectacles, and I realized that my living depended upon my answer. I mustered up all the knowledge of elementary history I had acquired in my boyhood, and replied : “

Well, nothing has so far been done in any methodical manner, although now and then we come across some ignorant villagers ploughing up old unusual bits of pottery and metal.”

“

Really,” he asked, pricking up his ears.

” And
what do they do with them ?

“

“

They simply throw them away or give them to children to play with,” I replied. “

Oh, too bad,” he muttered.

” Why couldn’t you

have collected these things in one place ?

“

“

I will take care to do that hereafter, sir,” I said ; and that settled it. He engaged me on the spot at fifty rupees a month, and my main business was to follow him about and help him.

I had my wits alive, and within a month I was in a position to lead him by the hand. Not the slightest object escaped my notice. I picked up everything I saw, cleaned and polished it, and held it up for his opinion. Most times, I am sorry to confess, they were useless bits of stuff of known origin namely, our own times. But I am glad to say that once I scored a hit.

We camped one week-end at Siral a village sixty miles from the town. It is a lovely ancient place, THE ROMAN IMAGE 37

consisting of a hundred houses. Sarayu River winds its way along the northern boundary of the village.

The river here is broader than it is anywhere else in the district. On the other bank of the river we have the beginnings of a magnificent jungle of bamboo and teak. The most modern structure in the place was a small two-roomed inspection lodge. The doctor occupied one room and I the other. We were scouting the surroundings for a mound under which was supposed to be a buried city. This discovery was going to push the earliest known civilization three centuries farther back and rival Mohenjadarro in antiquity. We might be pardoned if we set about our business with some intensity. Our doctor somehow seemed to possess an inexplicable feeling of rivalry with the discoverers of Mohenjadarro and such other places. His greatest desire was to have a monopoly of the earliest known civilization and place it where he chose. This seemed to me a slight weakness in his nature, but pardonable in a great man, who had done so much else in life. This is all beside the point. Let me get on with the story. One day I had gone to the river for a bathe. It was an exhilarating evening ; I had done a good day’s work, assisting the doctor to clean up and study a piece of stained glass picked up in a field outside the village. The doctor kept gazing at this glass all day. He

constantly shook his head and said :

“

This is easily the most

important piece of work which has come under my notice. This bit of glass you see is not ordinary archaeological stuff, but a very important link. This piece of glass is really Florentian, which went out of vogue in A.D. 5. How did this come here ? It is not found anywhere else in the world. If the identity of 38 THE ROMAN IMAGE

this is established properly we may ultimately have a great deal to say about the early Roman Empire and this part of India. This will revolutionize our whole knowledge of history.” He talked of nothing but that the whole day. He trembled with excitement and lost all taste for food. He kept on muttering : ” We must tread warily and not overlook the slightest evidence. Keep your eyes open. We are on the eve of great discoveries... .” And I caught this excitement and acquired a permanently searching look.

I was in this state when I plunged into the waters of Sarayu that evening. I am a good diver. As I went down my hand struck against a hard object in the sandy bed. Feeling with my fingers, I found it to be a stone image. When I came to the surface again I came up bearing that image with me. Dripping with water, I sat on the river step, without even drying myself, and examined the image.

“

This takes us on to an entirely new set of possibilities !

” exclaimed the doctor in great joy. He keenly examined it by our tin lantern. It was a stone image a foot high, which had acquired a glasslike smoothness, having been under water for years.

It had an arm, an eye, the nose, and the mouth missing. There were a few details of ornament and drapery which the doctor examined with special care.

It was 3 a.m. when he went to bed. An hour later the doctor peeped in at my doorway and announced : “

This is a Roman statue. How it came to be found in these parts is an historical fact we have to wrest from evidence. It is going to give an entirely new turn to Indian history.”

Within the next two months all the important papers and periodicals in the world published details THE ROMAN IMAGE 39

of this discovery. Papers were read before historical associations and conferences. I came to be looked upon as a sort of saviour of Indian history. For the doctor insisted upon giving me my due share of fame.

University honours came my way. I was offered lucrative positions here and there. It was finally decided that the image was that of a Roman Emperor called Tiberius II. It would be out of place to go into the details that led to this conclusion : but you need have no doubt that the doctor had excellent reasons for it. Besides the study of the image itself he went through some Roman texts which mentioned South India.

For the next few months we toured about a great deal lecturing on this subject and demonstrating. I went with my doctor to Madras and started work on a monograph on the subject. It was to be a monumental work covering over a thousand pages of demy size, full of photographs and sketches. You can understand why it should be so big when I tell you that it was going to be a combined work on early Roman history, Indian history, archaeology, and epigraphy. My name was going to appear as the joint author of the work. I realized that here was my future fame, position, and perhaps some money too. The doctor left me in entire charge of this work and went away to Upper India to continue a piece of work which he had already been doing. I sat in a large library the whole day, examining, investigating, studying, and writing. I became a fairly important person in learned societies. I worked from seven in the morning to eleven in the evening almost without a break, and throughout the day I had visits from people interested in the discovery. Papers and journals 40 THE ROMAN IMAGE

contained paragraphs now and then “Archaeologist assistant working on monograph ...” and its progress was duly reported to the public. And then there came a time when the press could announce : “

Monograph on which has been working for months now will be ready for

publication in ten days.

It is expected that this is going to make the richest contribution to Indian history ...” My fingers were worn out with writing. My eyes were nearly gone. I looked forward to the end of the work ; and then as my doctor wrote :

” You can have a holiday

for three months in any hill station you like and forget the whole business ...”

The manuscripts piled a yard high on my table. It was at this stage that I had to visit Siral once again. I had to obtain measurements of the spot where the image was found.

I left my work at that and hurried to the village.

I plunged into the river and came up. I sat on the river step, still dripping with water, noting down figures, when a stranger came and sat near me. We fell to talking, and I told him about my work, in the hope of drawing out further facts. He was a rustic, and he listened to me without emotion. At the end of my narration he remained peculiarly moody and asked me to repeat facts about the image. He compressed his lips and asked :

” Where do you say it

came from ?

“

Rome “

” Where is that ?

“

” In Europe,” I said. He stood still, puzzled, and I amplified :

” Where the European people live

“

“

I don't know about that but if it is the image which you found in these parts I can tell you something about it. It is without nose and arm, isn't it ?

“

THE ROMAN IMAGE 41

I assented, not knowing what was coming. He said : “

Follow me, if you want to know anything more about this image.” He led me up the bank, along a foot track which wound through the jungle. We reached a hamlet a mile off. He stopped in front of a little shrine and said :

” That image belonged to this

temple.” He led me into the shrine. We had to go stooping into it because of its narrow doorway and low roof. At the inner sanctum there was an image of Mari with a garland of yellow chrysanthemums around her neck, lit by a faint wick lamp. On one side of the sanctum doorway stood a dwarapalaka (doorkeeper) a winged creature a foot high. My friend pointed at the image and said : “

This formed

a pair with the one you picked up, and it used to adorn that side of the doorway.” I looked up where he pointed. I noticed a pedestal without anything on it. A doubt seized me. “

I want to examine the

figure,” I said. He brought down the wick lamp ; I examined by its flickering light the dwarapalaka.

“

Is this exactly like the one which was on that side ?

“

It was a superfluous question. This image was exactly like the image I had found, but without its injuries. ” Where was this made ?

“

“

I had it done by a stone-image maker, a fellow in another village. You see that hillock ? Its stone is made into images all over the world, and at its foot is a village where they make images.”

” Are you sure when it was made ?

“

“

Yes, I gave an advance of twenty rupees for it, and how that fellow delayed ! I went over to the village and sat up night and day for two months and , got the pair done. I watched them take shape before 42 THE ROMAN IMAGE

my eyes. And then we collected about fifty rupees and gave it to him. We wanted to improve this temple.” I put back the lamp and walked out. I sat down on the temple step.

” Why do you look so

sad? I thought you’d be pleased to know these things,” he said, watching me.

“

I am, I am only I’ve been rather unwell,” I assured him.

“

Can’t you tell me something more

about it : how it came to be found in the river ?

“

“

Yes, yes,” said my friend.

“

It was carried and

thrown into the river ; it didn't walk down there.”

” Oh !

“

I exclaimed.

” That is a story. For this we went to the court and had the priest dismissed and fined. He cannot come near the temple now. We spent one thousand rupees in lawyer fees alone ; we were prepared to spend all our fortune if only to see that priest removed.

It went up to Malgudi court we got a vakil from Madras.”

” What was wrong with your priest ?

“

” No doubt he had a hereditary claim and took up the work when his father died, but the fellow was a devil for drink, if ever there was one. Morning till night he was drinking, and he performed all the puja in that condition. We did not know what to do with him. We just tolerated him, hoping that some day the goddess would teach him a lesson. We did not like to be too harsh, since he was a poor fellow, and he went about his duties quietly. But when we added these two dwarapalakas at the doorway he got a queer notion in his head. He used to say that the two doorkeepers constantly harried him by staring at him wherever he went. He said that their look pricked him in the neck. Sometimes he would peep in from THE ROMAN IMAGE 43

within to see if the images were looking away, and he'd scream,

Ah, still they are watching me,' and shout at them. This went on for months. In course of time he began to shudder whenever he had to pass these doorkeepers. It was an acute moment of suspense for him when he had to cross that pair and get into the sanctum. Gradually he complained that if he ever took his eyes off

these figures they butted him from behind, kicked him, and pulled his hair, and so forth. He was afraid to look anywhere else and walked on cautiously with his eyes on the images.

But if he had his eyes on one, the other knocked him from behind. He showed us bruises and scratches sometimes. We declared we might treat his complaints seriously if he ever went into the shrine without a drop of drink in him. In course of time he started to seek his own remedy. He carried a small mallet with him, and whenever he got a knock he returned the blow ; it fell on a nose today, on an arm tomorrow, and on an ear another day. We didn't notice his handiwork for months. Judging from the mallet blows, the image on the left side seems to have been the greater offender.

” The culmination came when he knocked it off its pedestal and carried it to the river. Next morning he declared he saw it walk off and plunge into the river. He must have felt that this would serve as a lesson to the other image if it should be thinking of any trick. But the other image never got its chance.

For we dragged the priest before a law court and had him sent away.”

Thus ended the villager's tale. It took time for me to recover. I asked :

“

Didn't you have to pick up

the image from the water and show it to the judge ?

“

44 THE ROMAN IMAGE

“

No, because the fellow would not tell us where he had flung it. I did not know till this moment where exactly it could be found.”

When I went back to Madras I was a different man.

The doctor had just returned for a short stay. I told him everything. He was furious.

” We have made

ourselves mighty fools before the whole world,” he cried.

I didn’t know what to say. I mumbled : “I am so sorry, sir.” He pointed at the pile of manuscripts on the table and cried :

” Throw all that rubbish into

the fire, before we are declared mad. ...” I pushed the whole pile off the table and applied a match-stick.

We stood frowning at the roaring fire for a moment, and then he asked, pointing at the image : ” And

what will you do with it ?

“

“

I don’t know,” I said.

” Drown it. After all, you picked it up from the water that piece of nonsense !

” he cried.

I had never seen him in such a rage before. I wrapped the image in a piece of brown paper, carried it to the seashore, and flung it far into the sea. I hope it is still rolling about at the bottom of the Bay of Bengal. I only hope it won't get into some large fish and come back to the study table ! Later a brief message appeared in all the important papers : " The

manuscript on which Doctor and assistant were engaged has been destroyed, and the work will be suspended."

The doctor gave me two months' salary and bade me good-bye.

6

THE BLIND DOG

IT was not a very impressive or high-class dog ; it was one of those commonplace dogs one sees everywhere colour of white and dust, tail mutilated at a young age by God knows whom, born in the street, and bred on the leavings and garbage of the market-place. He had spotty eyes and undistinguished carriage and needless pugnacity. Before he was two years old he had earned the scars of a hundred fights on his body. When he needed rest on hot afternoons he lay curled up under the culvert at the eastern gate of the market. In the evenings he set out on his daily rounds, loafed in the surrounding streets and lanes, engaged himself in skirmishes, picked up edibles on the roadside, and was back at the market gate by nightfall.

This life went on for three years. And then occurred a change in his life. A beggar, blind of both eyes, appeared at the market gate. An old woman led him up there early in the morning, seated him at the gate, and came up again at midday with some food, gathered his coins, and took him home at night.

The dog was sleeping near by. He was stirred by the smell of food. He got up, came out of his shelter, and stood before the blind man, wagging his tail and gazing expectantly at the bowl, as he was eating his sparse meal. The blind man swept his arms about and asked :

" Who is there ?

" At which the dog

went up and licked his hand. The blind man stroked 45

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its coat gently tail to ear and said : ” What a beauty

you are. Come with me ” He threw a handful of food which the dog ate gratefully. It was perhaps an auspicious moment for starting a friendship. They met every day there, and the dog cut off much of its rambling to sit up beside the blind man and watch him ^receive alms morning to evening. In course of time observing him, the dog understood that the passers-by must give a coin, and whoever went away without dropping a coin was chased by the dog ; he tugged the edge of their clothes by his teeth and pulled them back to the old man at the gate and let go only after something was dropped in his bowl. Among those who frequented this place was a village urchin, who had the mischief of a devil in him. He liked to tease the blind man by calling him names and by trying to pick up the coins in his bowl. The blind man helplessly shouted and cried and whirled his staff. On Thursdays this boy appeared at the gate, carrying on his head a basket loaded with cucumber or plantain. Every Thursday afternoon it was a crisis in the blind man’s life. A seller of bright coloured but doubtful perfumes with his wares mounted on a wheeled platform, a man who spread out cheap story-books on a gunny sack, another man who carried coloured ribbons on an elaborate frame these were the people who usually gathered under the same arch, On a Thursday when the young man appeared at the Eastern gate one of them remarked, ” Blind fellow !

Here comes your scourge

“

“Oh, God, is this Thursday?” he wailed. He swept his arms about and called : “

Dog, dog, come

here, where are you ?

” He made the peculiar noise

which brought the dog to his side. He stroked his

head and muttered :

” Don’t let that little rascal

“

At this very moment the boy came up with a leer on his face.

“

Blind man ! Still pretending you have no eyes.

If you are really blind, you should not know this either

” He stopped, his hand moving towards the bowl. The dog sprang on him and snapped his jaws on wrist. The boy extricated his hand and ran for his life. The dog bounded up behind him and chased him out of the market.

“

See the mongrel’s affection for this old fellow/’

marvelled the perfume-vendor.

One evening at the usual time the old woman failed to turn up, and the blind man waited at the gate, worrying as the evening grew into night. As he sat fretting there, a neighbour came up and said : “

Sami,

don’t wait for the old woman. She will not come again. She died this afternoon

“

The blind man lost the only home he had, and the only person who cared for him in this world. The ribbon-vendor suggested :

“

Here, take this white

tape

” He held a length of the white cord which he had been selling

“

I will give this to you

free of cost. Tie it to the dog and let him lead you about if he is really so fond of you “

Life for the dog took a new turn now. He came to take the place of the old woman. He lost his freedom completely. His world came to be circumscribed by the limits of the white cord which the ribbon-vendor had spared. He had to forget wholesale all his old life all his old haunts. He simply had to stay on for ever at the end of that string. When he saw other dogs, friends or foes, instinctively he sprang up, tugging the string, and this invariably earned him a 48 THE BLIND DOG

kick from his master.

“

Rascal, want to tumble me

down have sense

” In a few days the dog learnt

to discipline his instinct and impulse. He ceased to take notice of other dogs, even if they came up and growled at his side. He lost his own orbit of movement and contact with his fellow-creatures.

To the extent of this loss his master gained. He moved about as he had never moved in his life. All day he was on his legs, led by the dog. With the staff in one hand and the dog-lead in the other he moved out of his home a corner in a choultry veranda a few yards off the market : he had moved in there after the old woman’s death. He started out early in the day. He found that he could treble his income by moving about instead of staying in one place. He moved down the choultry street, and wherever he heard people’s voices he stopped and held out

his hands for alms. Shops, schools, hospitals, hotels he left nothing out. He gave a tug when he wanted the dog to stop, and shouted like a bullock-driver when he wanted him to move on. The dog protected his feet from going into pits, or stumping against steps or stones, and took him up inch by inch on safe ground and steps. For this sight people gave coins and helped him. Children gathered round him and gave him things to eat. A dog is essentially an active creature who punctuates his hectic rounds with well-defined periods of rest. But now this dog (henceforth to be known as Tiger) had lost all rest. He had rest only when the old man sat down somewhere. At night the old man slept with the cord turned around his finger. “

I can't take chances with you

” he said. A

great desire to earn more money than ever before seized his master, so that he felt any resting a waste THE BLIND DOG 49

of opportunity, and the dog had to be continuously on his feet. Sometimes his legs refused to move.

But if he slowed down even slightly his master goaded him on fiercely with his staff. The dog whined and groaned under this thrust.

” Don't whine, you

rascal. Don't I give you your food ? You want to loaf, do you ?

“

swore the blind man. The dog

lumbered up and down and round and round the market-place on slow steps, tied down to the blind tyrant. Long after the traffic at the market ceased, you could hear the night stabbed by the far-off wail of the tired dog. It lost its original appearance. As months rolled on, bones stuck up at his haunches and ribs were relieved through his fading coat.

The ribbonseller, the novel-vendor and the perfumer observed it one evening, when business was slack, and held a conference among themselves : “It rends

my heart to see that poor dog slaving. Can't we do something ?

” The ribbonseller remarked :

” That

rascal has started lending money for interest I heard it from that fruit-seller He is earning more than he needs. He has become a very devil for money “

At this point the perfumer's eyes caught the scissors dangling from the ribbon-rack.

” Give it here,” he

said and moved on with the scissors in hand.

The blind man was passing in front of the Eastern gate. The dog was straining the lead. There was a piece of bone lying on the way and the dog was straining to pick it up. The lead became taut and hurt the blind man's hand, and he tugged the string and kicked till the dog howled. It howled, but could not pass the bone lightly ; it tried to make another dash for it. The blind man was heaping curses on it.

The perfumer stepped up, applied the scissors and 50 THE BLIND DOG

snipped the cord. The dog bounced off and picked up the bone. The blind man stopped dead where he stood, with the other half of the string dangling in his hand.

“

Tiger ! Tiger ! Where are you ?

” he

cried. The perfumer moved away quietly, muttering : ” You heartless devil ! You will never get at him again ! He has his freedom !

” The dog went off

at top speed. He nosed about the ditches happily, hurled himself on other dogs,

and ran round and round the fountain in the market-square barking, his eyes sparkling with joy. He returned to his favourite haunts and hung about the butcher's shop, tea-stall, and the bakery.

The ribbon-vendor and his two friends stood at the market gate and enjoyed the sight immensely as the blind man struggled to find his way about. He stood rooted to the spot waving his stick ; he felt as if he were hanging in mid-air. He was wailing.

“

Oh,

where is my dog? Where is my dog? Won't someone give him back to me? I will murder it when I get at it again !

” He groped about, tried to

cross the road, came near being run over by a dozen vehicles at different points, tumbled and struggled and gasped.

” He'd deserve it if he was run over, this heartless blackguard

“

they said, observing

him. However, the old man struggled through and with the help of someone found his way back to his corner in the choultry veranda and sank down on his gunnysack bed, half faint with the strain of his journey.

He was not seen for ten days, fifteen days and twenty days. Nor was the dog seen anywhere. They commented among themselves.

” The dog must be

loafing over the whole earth, free and happy. The THE BLIND DOG 51

beggar is perhaps gone for ever

“

Hardly was

this sentence uttered when they heard the familiar tap-tap of the blind man's staff. They saw him again coming up the pavement led by the dog.

" Look ! Look !

"

they cried.

" He has again got

at it and tied it up

" The ribbonseller could not

contain himself. He ran up and said : " Where

have you been all these days ?

"

" Know what happened !

"

cried the blind man.

" This dog ran away. I should have died in a day or two, confined to my corner, no food, not an anna to earn imprisoned in my corner. I should have perished if it continued for another day But this thing returned

"

" When ? When ?

"

"

Last night. At midnight as I slept in bed, he came and licked my face. I felt like murdering him.

I gave him a blow which he will never forget again,”

said the blind man. “

I forgave him, after all a dog !

He loafed as long as he could pick up some rubbish to eat on the road, but real hunger has driven him back to jne, but he will not leave me again. See !

I have got this

” and he shook the lead : it was

a steel chain this time.

Once again there was the dead, despairing look in the dog’s eyes.

” Go on, you fool,” cried the blind man, shouting like an ox-driver. He tugged the chain, poked with the stick, and the dog moved away on slow steps. They stood listening to the tap-tap going away.

” Death alone can help that dog,” cried the ribbonseller, looking after it with a sigh.

” What can we do

with a creature who returns to his doom with such a free heart ?

“

7

FELLOW-FEELING

THE Madras-Bangalore Express was due to start in a few minutes. Trolleys and barrows piled with trunks and beds rattled their way through the bustle. Fruit-sellers and beedi-and-betel sellers cried themselves hoarse. Latecomers pushed, shouted and perspired. The engine added to the general noise with the low

monotonous hum of its boiler ; the first bell rang, the guard looked at his watch. Mr. Rajam Iyer arrived on the platform at a terrific pace, with a small roll of bedding under one arm and an absurd yellow trunk under the other. He ran to the first third-class compartment that caught his eye, peered in and, since the door could not be opened on account of the congestion inside, flung himself in through the window.

Fifteen minutes later Madras flashed past the train in window-framed patches of sun-scorched roofs and fields. At the next halt, Mandhakam, most of the passengers got down. The compartment built to “

seat 8 passengers ; 4 British Troops, or 6 Indian Troops,” now carried only nine. Rajam Iyer found a seat and made himself comfortable opposite a sallow, meek passenger, who suddenly removed his coat, folded it and placed it under his head and lay down, shrinking himself to the area he had occupied while he was sitting. With his knees drawn up almost to 52

FELLOW-FEELING 53

his chin, he rolled himself into a ball. Rajam Iyer threw at him an indulgent, compassionate look. He then fumbled for his glasses and pulled out of his pocket a small book, which set forth in clear Tamil the significance of the obscure Sandhi rites that every Brahmin worth the name performs thrice daily.

He was startled out of this pleasant languor by a series of growls coming from a passenger who had got in at Katpadi. The newcomer, looking for a seat, had been irritated by the spectacle of the meek passenger asleep and had enforced the law of the Third-class. He then encroached on most of the meek passenger’s legitimate space and began to deliver home-truths which passed by easy stages from impudence to impertinence and finally to ribaldry.

Rajam Iyer peered over his spectacles. There was a dangerous look in his eyes. He tried to return to the book, but could not. The bully’s speech was gathering momentum.

” What is all this ?

“

Rajam Iyer asked suddenly,

in a hard tone.

” What is what ?

“

growled back the newcomer,

turning sharply on Rajam Iyer.

” Moderate your style a bit,” Rajam Iyer said firmly.

” You moderate yours first,’

1

replied the other.

A pause.

” My man,” Rajam Iyer began endearingly, “

this

sort of thing will never do.”

The newcomer received this in silence. Rajam Iyer felt encouraged and drove home his moral : “Just try and be more courteous, it is your duty.”

” You mind your business,” replied the newcomer.

Rajam Iyer shook his head disapprovingly and 54 FELLOW-FEELING

drawled out a ” No.” The newcomer stood looking out for some time and, as if expressing a brilliant truth that had just dawned on him, said, ” You arc

a Brahmin, I see. Learn, sir, that your days are over.

Don’t think you can bully us as you have been bullying us all these years.”

Rajam Iyer gave a short laugh and said : ” What

has it to do with your beastly conduct to this gentleman ?

“

The newcomer assumed a tone of mock humility and said :

“

Shall I take the dust from your feet, O

Holy Brahmin ? Oh, Brahmin, Brahmin.” He continued in a sing-song fashion :

” Your days are over,

my dear sir, learn that. I should like to see you trying a bit of bossing on us.”

” Whose master is who ?

“

asked Rajam Iyer

philosophically.

The newcomer went on with no obvious relevance : ” The cost of mutton has gone up out of all proportion.

It is nearly double what it used to be.”

“

Is it ?

“

asked Rajam Iyer.

“

Yes, and why ?

“

continued the other.

“

Because

Brahmins have begun to eat meat and they pay high prices to get it secretly.” He then turned to the other passengers and added :

” And we non-Brahmins

have to pay the same price, though we don’t care for the secrecy.”

Rajam Iyer leaned back in his seat, reminding himself of a proverb which said that if you threw a stone into a gutter it would only spurt filth in your face.

“

And,” said the newcomer,

“

the price of meat

used to be five annas per pound. I remember the days quite well. It is nearly twelve annas now.

Why? Because the Brahmin is prepared to pay so FELLOW-FEELING 55

much, if only he can have it in secret I have with my own eyes seen Brahmins, pukkah Brahmins with sacred threads on their bodies, carrying fish under their arms, of course all wrapped up in a towel. Ask them what it is, and they will tell you that it is plantain.

Plantain that has life, I suppose ! I once tickled a fellow under the arm and out came the biggest fish in the market. Hey, Brahmin,” he said, turning to Rajam Iyer,

” what did you have for your meal this morning?” “Who? I ?

“

asked Rajam Iyer. “Why

do you want to know ?

” “

Look, sirs,” said the

newcomer to the other passengers, “

why is he afraid

to tell us what he ate this morning ?

” And turning

to Rajam Iyer,

“

Mayn’t a man ask another what he

had for his morning meal ?

“

“

Oh, by all means. I had rice, ghee, curds, brinjal soup, fried beans.”

“

Oh, is that all ?

“

asked the newcomer, with an

innocent look.

“

Yes,” replied Rajam Iyer.

“

Is that all ?

“

“

Yes, how many times do you want me to repeat it?”

” No offence, no offence,” replied the newcomer.

” Do you mean to say I am lying ?

“

asked

Rajam Iyer.

“

Yes,” replied the other,

“

you have omitted from

your list a few things. Didn’t I see you this morning going home from the market with a banana, a water banana, wrapped up in a towel, under your arm?

Possibly it was somebody very much like you. Possibly I mistook the person. My wife prepares excellent soup with fish. You won’t be able to find the difference between dholl soup and fish soup. Send your wife, 56 FELLOW-FEELING

or the wife of the person that was exactly like you to my wife to learn soup

making. Hundreds of Brahmins have smacked their lips over the dhol soup prepared in my house. I am a leper if there is a lie in anything I say.”

” You are,” replied Rajam Iyer, grinding his teeth.

” You are a rabid leper.”

” Whom do you call a leper !

“

” You !

“

“

I ? You call me a leper ?

“

” No. I call you a rabid leper.”

” You call me rabid ?

“

the newcomer asked, striking

his chest to emphasize

” Me.”

” You are a filthy brute,” said Rajam Iyer.

” You

must be handed over to the police.”

” Bah !

“

exclaimed the newcomer. ” As if I didn’t know what these police were.”

“

Yes, you must have had countless occasions to know the police. And you will see more of them yet in your miserable life, if you don’t get beaten to death like the street mongrel you are,” said Rajam Iyer in great passion.

” With your foul mouth you are bound to come to that end.”

” What do you say ?

“

shouted the newcomer

menacingly.

” What do you say, you vile humbug ?

“

” Shut up,” Rajam Iyer cried.

” You shut up.”

” Do you know to whom you are talking ?

“

” What do I care who the son of a mongrel is ?

“

“

I will thrash you with my slippers,” said Rajam Iyer.

“

I will pulp you down with an old rotten sandal,”

came the reply.

“

I will kick you,” said Rajam Iyer.

FELLOW-FEELING 57

“

Will you ?

” howled the newcomer.

” Come on, let us see.”

Both rose to their feet simultaneously.

There they stood facing each other on the floor of the compartment. Rajam Iyer was seized by a sense of inferiority. The newcomer stood nine clean inches over him. He began to feel ridiculous, short and fat, wearing a loose dhot and a green coat, while the newcomer towered above him in his grease-spotted khaki suit. Out of the corner of his eye he noted that the other passengers were waiting eagerly to see how the issue would be settled and were not in the least disposed to intervene.

” Why do you stand as if your mouth was stopped with mud ?

“

asked the newcomer.

” Shut up,” Rajam Iyer snapped, trying not to be impressed by the size of the adversary.

” Your honour said that you would kick me,” said the newcomer, pretending to offer himself.

” Won’t I kick you ?

“

asked Rajam Iyer.

“

Try.”

“

No,” said Rajam Iyer,

“

I will do something

worse.”

” Do it,” said the other, throwing forward his chest and pushing up the sleeves of his coat.

Rajam Iyer removed his coat and rolled up his sleeves. He rubbed his hands and commanded suddenly

” Stand still !

” The newcomer was taken

aback. He stood for a second baffled. Rajam Iyer gave him no time to think. With great force he swung his right arm and brought it near the other’s cheek, but stopped it short without hitting him.

” Wait a minute, I think I had better give you a chance,” said Rajam Iyer.

58 FELLOW-FEELING

” What chance ?

“

asked the newcomer.

“

It would be unfair if I did it without giving you a chance.”

” Did what ?

“

” You stand there and it will be over in a fraction of a second.”

“

Fraction of a second ? What will you do ?

“

“

Oh, nothing very complicated,” replied Rajam Iyer nonchalantly,

“

nothing very complicated. I

will slap your right cheek and at the same time tug your left ear and your mouth, which is now under your nose, will suddenly find itself under your left ear, and, what is more, stay there. I assure you, you won’t feel any pain.”

” What do you say ?

“

” And it will all be over before you say ‘

Sri Rama V

“

I don’t believe it,” said the newcomer.

” Well and good. Don’t believe it,” said Rajam Iyer carelessly.

“

I never do it except under extreme provocation.”

” Do you think I am an infant ?

“

“

I implore you, my man, not to believe me. Have you heard of a thing called ju-jitsu ? Well, this is a simple trick in ju-jitsu perhaps known to half a dozen persons in the whole of South India.”

” You said you would kick me,” said the newcomer.

“

Well, isn’t this worse ?

“

asked Rajam Iyer. He

drew a line on the newcomer’s face between his left ear and mouth, muttering

“

I must admit you have a

tolerably good face and round figure. But imagine yourself going about the

streets with your mouth under your left ear ...” He chuckled at the vision.

“

I

expect at Jalarpet station there will be a huge crowd outside our compartment to see you/

9 The newcomer

FELLOW-FEELING 59

stroked his chin thoughtfully. Rajam Iyer continued : “

I felt it my duty to explain the whole thing to you beforehand. I am not as hot headed as you are. I have some consideration for your wife and children.

It will take some time for the kids to recognize papa when he returns home with his mouth under ...

How many children have you ?

“

“

Four.”

” And then think of it,” said Rajam Iyer : ” You

will have to take your food under your left ear, and you will need the assistance of your wife to drink water. She will have to pour it in.”

“

I will go to a doctor,” said the newcomer.

” Do go,” replied Rajam Iyer,

” and I will give you a

thousand rupees if you find a doctor. You may try even European doctors.”

The newcomer stood ruminating with knitted brow.

” Now prepare,” shouted Rajam Iyer, ” one blow on

the right cheek. I will jerk your left ear, and your mouth ...”

The newcomer suddenly ran to the window and leaned far out of it. Rajam decided to leave the compartment at Jalarpet.

But the moment the train stopped at Jalarpet station, the newcomer grabbed his bag and jumped out. He moved away at a furious pace and almost knocked down a coconut-seller and a person carrying a trayload of coloured toys. Rajam Iyer felt it would not be necessary for him to get out now. He leaned through the window and cried,

” Look here !

” The

newcomer turned.

“

Shall I keep a seat for you ?

“

asked Rajam Iyer.

“No, my ticket is for Jalaipet,” the newcomer answered and quickened his pace.

60 FELLOW-FEELING

The train had left Jalarpet at least a mile behind.

The meek passenger still sat shrunk in a corner of the seat. Rajam Iyer looked over his spectacles and said : “

Lie down if you like.

53

The meek passenger proceeded to roll himself into a ball. Rajam Iyer added,

” Did you hear that bully

say that his ticket was for Jalarpet ?

“

“

Yes.”

“

Well,” he lied,

u he is in the fourth compartment from here. I saw him get into it just as the train started.”

Though the meek passenger was too grateful to doubt this statement, one or two other passengers looked at Rajam Iyer sceptically.

8

THE WATCHMAN

THERE was still a faint splash of red on the western horizon. The watchman stood on the tank bund and took a final survey. All the people who had come for

evening walks had returned to their homes. Not a soul anywhere except that obstinate angler, at the northern end, who sat with his feet in water, sadly gazing on his rod. It was no use bothering about him : he would sit there till midnight, hoping for a catch.

The Taluk office gong struck nine. The watchman was satisfied that no trespassing cattle had sneaked in through the wire fencing. As he turned to go, he saw, about a hundred yards away, a shadowy figure moving down the narrow stone steps that led to the water's edge. He thought for a second that it might be a ghost. He dismissed the idea, and went up to investigate. If it was anyone come to bathe at this hour... . From the top step he observed that it was a woman's form. She stooped over the last step and placed something on it possibly a letter. She then stepped into knee-deep water, and stood there, her hands pressed together in prayer. Unmistakable signs always to be followed by the police and gruesome details, bringing the very worst possible reputation to a tank.

He shouted,

” Come out, there, come out of ik”

The form looked up from the water.

” Don't stand

62 THE WATCHMAN

there and gaze. You'll catch a cold, come up whoever you are ..." He raced down the steps and picked up the letter. He hurriedly lit his lamp, and turned its wick, till it burnt brightly, and held it up, murmuring :

“

I don't like this. Why is everyone coming to the same tank ? If you want to be dead, throw yourself under an engine," he said.

The light fell upon the other's face. It was a young girl's, wet with tears. He felt a sudden pity. He said, “

Sit down, sit down and rest ... no, no ... go up two more steps and sit down. Don't sit so near the water ..." She obeyed. He sat down on the last step between her and the water, placed the lantern on the step, took out a piece of tobacco and put it in his mouth. She buried her face in her hands, and began to sob. He felt troubled and asked : " Why

don't you rise and go home, lady ?

“

She sputtered through her sob :

“

I have no home

in this world !

“

" Don't tell me ! Surely, you didn't grow up without a home all these years !

“

said the watchman.

“

I lost my mother when I was five years old “

she said.

“

I thought so ...” replied the watchman, and added,

” and your father married again and you grew up under the care of your step-mother ?

“

“

Yes, yes, how do you know ?

“

she asked.

“

I am sixty-five years old,” he said and asked : ” Did your step-mother trouble you ?

“

“

No, there you are wrong,” the girl said.

” She

is very kind to me. She has been looking after me ever since my father died a few years ago. She has just a little money on hand left by my father, and she spends it on us.”

THE WATCHMAN 63

The watchman looked at the stars, sighed for the dinner that he was missing.

“

It's very late, madam,

go home.”

“

I tell you I've no home “

she retorted

angrily.

” Your step-mother's house is all right from what you say. She is good to you.”

” But why should I be a burden to her ? Who am I ?

“

“You are her husband's daughter

“

the watchman

said, and added,

“

that is enough claim.”

” No no. I won't live on anybody's charity.”

” Then you will have to wait till they find you a husband “

She glared at him in the dark.

“

That's what I

do not want to do. I want to study and become a doctor and earn my livelihood. I don't want to marry. I often catch my mother talking far into the night to her eldest son, worrying about my future, about my marriage. I know they cannot afford to keep me in college very long now ; it costs about twenty rupees a month.”

“

Twenty rupees !

” The watchman exclaimed.

It was his month's salary.

” How can anybody spend

so much for books !

“

“

Till today,” she said,

“

I was hoping that I would

get a scholarship. That would have saved me. But this evening they announced ; others have got it, not I. My name is not there

” and she broke down

again. The watchman looked at her in surprise. He comprehended very little of all this situation. She added :

” And when they come to know of this, they will try to arrange my marriage.

Someone is coming to have a look at me tomorrow

“

64 THE WATCHMAN

“

Marry him and may God bless you with ten children.”

“

No, no,” she cried hysterically.

“

I don’t want

to marry. I want to study.”

The silent night was stabbed by her sobbing and some night bird rustled the water, and wavelets beat upon the shore. Seeing her suffer, he found his own sorrows in life came to his mind ; how in those far-off times, in his little village home an epidemic of cholera laid out his father and mother and brothers on the same day, and he was the sole survivor ; how he was turned out of his ancestral home through the trickery of his father’s kinsmen, and he wandered as an orphan, suffering indescribable hunger and privation.

“

Everyone has his own miseries,” he said.

“

If

people tried to kill themselves for each one of them, I don’t know how often they would have to drown.”

He remembered further incidents and his voice shook with sorrow.

” You are young and you don’t know what sorrow is ...” He remained silent and

a sob broke out of him as he said :

“

I prayed to all the

gods in the world for a son. My wife bore me eight children. Only one daughter lives now, and none of the others saw the eleventh year , , .” The girl looked at him in bewilderment.

The Taluk office gong struck again.

“

It is late,

you had better get up and go home ” he said.

She replied :

“

I have no home.”

He felt irritated.

” You are making too much of

nothing. You should not be obstinate “

” You don’t know my trouble,” she said.

He picked up his lantern and staff and got up. He put her letter down where he found it.

“

If you are going to be so obstinate I’ll leave you THE WATCHMAN 65

alone. No one can blame me.” He paused for a moment, looked at her, and went up the steps ; not a word passed between them again.

The moment he came back to duty next morning, he hurried down the stone steps. The letter lay where he had dropped it on the previous night. He picked it up and gazed on it, helplessly, wishing that it could tell him about the fate of the girl after he had left her.

He tore it up and flung it on the water. As he watched the bits float off on ripples, he blamed himself for leaving her and going away on the previous night.

“

I am responsible for at least one suicide in this tank,”

he often remarked to himself. He could never look at the blue expanse of water again with an easy mind.

Even many months later he could not be certain that the remains of a body would not come up all of a sudden.

” Who knows, it sometimes happens that the body gets stuck deep down,” he reflected.

Years later, one evening as he stood on the bund and took a final survey before going home, he saw a car draw up on the road below. A man, a woman, and three children emerged from the car and climbed the bund. When they approached, the watchman felt a start at his heart ; the figure and face of the woman seemed familiar to him. Though altered by years, and ornaments, and dress, he thought that he had now recognized the face he had once seen by the lantern light. He felt excited at this discovery. He had numerous questions to ask. He brought together his palms and saluted her respectfully. He expected she would stop and speak to him. But she merely threw 66 THE WATCHMAN

at him an indifferent glance and passed on. He stood staring after her for a moment, baffled.

“

Probably

this is someone else/’ he muttered and turned to go home, resolving to dismiss the whole episode from his mind.

THE TIGER'S CLAW

THE man-eater's dark career was ended. The men who had laid it low were the heroes of the day. They were garlanded with chrysanthemum flowers and seated on the arch of the highest bullock cart and were paraded in the streets, immediately followed by another bullock-drawn open cart, on which their trophy lay with glazed eyes overflowing the cart on every side, his tail trailing the dust. The village suspended all the normal activity for the day : men, women, and children thronged the highways, pressing on with the procession, excitedly talking about the tiger. The tiger had held a reign of terror for nearly five years, in the villages that girt Mempi forests.

We watched fascinated this scene, drifting along with the crowd till the Talkative Man patted us from behind and cried :

“

Lost in wonder ! If youVe

had your eyefull of that carcass, come aside and listen to me ...” After the crowd surged past us, he sat us on a rock mount, under a margosa tree and began his tale

“

I was once camping in Koppal, the most obscure of all the villages that lie scattered about the Mempi region. You might wonder what I was doing in that desolate corner of the Earth. I'll tell you.

You remember I've often spoken to you about my work as agent of a soil fertilizer company. It was the 67

68 THE TIGER'S CLAW

most miserable period of my life. Twentyfive days in the month, I had to be on the road, visiting nooks and corners of the country and popularizing the stuff... . One such journey brought me on to the village Koppal. It was not really a ‘

village

‘ but

just a clearing with about forty houses and two streets, hemmed in by the jungle on all sides. The place was dingy and depressing. Why our company should have sought to reach a place like this for their stuff, I can't understand. They would not have known of its existence but for the fact that it was on the railway.

Yes, actually on the railway, some obscure branch-line passed through this village, though most trains did not stop there. Its centre of civilization was its railway station presided over by a porter in blue, and an old station-master, a wizened man wearing a green turban, and with red and green flags always tucked under his arms. Let me tell you about the

station.’ It was

not a building, but an old railway carriage, which, having served its term of life, was deprived of its wheels and planted beside the railway lines. It had one or two windows through which the station-master issued tickets, and spoke to those occasional passengers who turned up in this wilderness. A convolvulus creeper was trained over its entrance : no better use could be found for an ex-carriage.

” One November morning a mixed train put me down at this station and puffed away into the forest. The station-master, with the flags under his arm, became excited on seeing me. He had seen so few travellers arriving that it gave him no end of pleasure to see a new face. He appointed himself my host immediately, and took me into the ex-compartment and seated me on a stool. He said :

‘ Excuse me. I'll get off these

papers in a minute ...' He scrawled over some brown sheets, put them away and rose. He locked up the station, and took me to his home a very tiny stone building consisting of just one room, a kitchen, and a backyard. The station-master lived here with his wife and seven children. He fed me. I changed.

He sent the porter along with me to the village, which was nearly a mile off in the interior. I gathered about me the peasants of those forty houses and lectured to them from the porch of the headman's house. They listened to me patiently, received the samples and my elaborate directions for their use, and went away to their respective occupations, with cynical comments among themselves regarding my ideas of manuring. I packed up and started back for the station-master's house at dusk, my throat smarting and my own words ringing in my ears.

Though a couple of trains were now passing, the only stopping train would be at 5.30 on the following morning. After dinner at the station-master's house, I felt the time had come for me to leave : it would be indelicate to stay on, when the entire family was waiting to spread their beds in the hall. I said I would sleep on the platform till my train arrived... .

'No, no, these are very bad parts. Not like your town.

Full of tigers... .' the station-master said. He let me, as a special concession, sleep in the '

station.' A

heavy table, a chair and a stool occupied most of the space in the compartment. I pushed them aside and made a little space for myself in a corner. I'd at least eight hours before me. I laid myself down : all kinds of humming and rustling sounds came through the still night, and telegraph poles and night insects hummed, and bamboo bushes creaked. I got up, 70 THE TIGER'S CLAW

bolted the little station door and lay down, feeling forlorn. It became very warm, and I couldn't sleep.

I got up again, opened the door slightly to let in a little air, placed the chair across the door and went back to my bed.

" I fell asleep and dreamt. I was standing on the crest of a hill and watching the

valley below, under a pale moonlight. Far off a line of cat-like creatures was moving across the slope, half shadows, and I stood looking at them admiringly, for they marched on with great elegance. I was so much lost in this vision that I hadn't noticed that they had moved up, and come by a winding path right behind me. I turned and saw that they were not cat-like in size but full-grown tigers. I made a dash to the only available shelter the station room.

“At this point the dream ended as the chair barricading the door came hurtling through and fell on me.

I opened my eyes and saw at the door a tiger pushing himself in. It was a muddled moment for me : not being sure whether the dream was continuing or whether I was awake. I at first thought it was my friend the station-master who was coming in, but my dream had fully prepared my mind I saw the thing dearly against the star-lit sky, tail wagging, growling, and above all, his terrible eyes gleaming through the dark. I understood that the Fertilizer Company would have to manage without my lectures from the following day. The tiger himself was rather startled by the noise of the chair, and stood hesitating. He saw me quite clearly in my corner, and he seemed to be telling himself :

‘ My dinner is there ready, but

let me first know what this clattering noise is about.9

Somehow wild animals are less afraid of human beings THE TIGER'S CLAW
71

than they are of pieces of furniture like chairs and tables. I have seen circus men managing a whole menagerie with nothing more than a chair. God gives us such recollections in order to save us at critical moments ; and as the tiger stood observing me and watching the chair, I put out my hands and with desperate strength drew the table towards me, and also the stool. I sat with my back to the corner ; the table wedged in nicely with the corner. I sat under it, and the stool walled up another side. While I dragged the table down, a lot of things fell off it, a table lamp, a long knife and pins. From my shelter I peeped at the tiger, who was also watching me with interest. Evidently he didn't like his meal to be so completely shut out of sight. So he cautiously advanced a step or two, making a sort of rumbling noise at his throat which seemed to shake up the little station house. My end was nearing. I really pitied the woman whose lot it was to have

become my wife.

” I held up the chair like a shield, and flourished it, and the tiger hesitated and fell back a step or two.

Now once again we spent some time watching for each other’s movements. I held my breath and waited. The tiger stood there fiercely waving its tail, which sometimes struck the side walls and sent forth a thud. He suddenly crouched down without taking his eyes off me, and scratched the floor with his claws.

“He is sharpening it for me,” I told myself. The little shack had already acquired the smell of a zoo. It made me sick. The tiger kept scratching the floor with his forepaws. It was the most hideous sound you could think of.

“All of a sudden he sprang up and flung his entire weight on this lot of furniture. I thought it’d be 72 THE TIGER’S CLAW

reduced to matchwood, but fortunately, our railways have a lot of foresight and choose the heaviest timber for their furniture. That saved me. The tiger could do nothing more than perch himself on the roof of the table and hang down his paws : he tried to strike me down, but I parried with the chair and stool.

The table rocked under him. I felt smothered : I could feel his breath on me. He sat completely covering the top, and went on shooting his paws in my direction. He would have scooped portions of me out for his use, but fortunately I sat right in the centre, a hair’s-breadth out of his reach on any side. He made vicious sounds and wriggled over my head.

He could have knocked the chair to one side and dragged me out, if he had come down, but somehow the sight of the chair seemed to worry him for a time.

He preferred to be out of its reach. This battle went on for a while, I cannot say how long : time had come to a dead stop in my world. He jumped down and walked about the table, looking for a gap ; I rattled the chair a couple of times, but very soon it lost all its terror for him ; he patted the chair and found that it was inoffensive. At this discovery he tried to hurl it aside. But I was too quick for him. I swiftly drew it towards me and wedged it tight into the arch of the table, and the stool protected me on another side.

I was more or less in a stockade made of the legs of furniture. He sat up on his

haunch in front of me, wondering how best to get at me. Now the chair, table, and stool had formed a solid block with me at their heart, and they could withstand all his tricks. He scrutinized my arrangement with great interest, espied a gap, and thrust his paw in. It dangled in my eyes with the curved claws opening out THE TIGER'S CLAW 73

towards me. I felt very angry at the sight of it.

Why should I allow the offensive to be developed all in his own way? I felt very indignant. The long knife from the station-master's table was lying nearby.

I picked it up and drove it in. He withdrew his paw, maddened by pain. He jumped up and nearly brought down the room, and then tried to crack to bits the entire stockade. He did not succeed. He once again thrust his paw in. I employed the long knife to good purpose and cut off a digit with the claw on it. It was a fight to a finish between him and me. He returned again and again to the charge. And I cut out, let me confess, three claws, before I had done with him. I had become as blood-thirsty as he.

(Those claws, mounted on gold, are hanging around the necks of my three daughters. You can come and see them if you like sometime.)

"At about five in the morning the station-master and the porter arrived, and innocently walked in.

The moment they stepped in the tiger left me and turned on them. They both ran at top speed. The station-master flew back to his house and shut the door. The porter on fleet foot went up a tree, with the tiger halfway up behind him. Thus they stopped, staring at each other till the goods train lumbered in after 5.30. It hissed and whistled and belched fire, till the tiger took himself down and bolted across the lines into the jungle.

"He did not visit these parts again, though one was constantly hearing of his ravages. I did not meet him again till a few moments ago when I saw him riding in that bullock cart. I instantly recognized him by his right forepaw, where three toes and claws are missing. You seemed to be so much lost in 74 THE TIGER'S CLAW

admiration for those people who met the tiger at their own convenience, with gun and company, thfrt I thought you might give a little credit to a fellow who

has faced the same animal, alone, barehanded. Hence this narration.”

When the Talkative Man left us we moved on to the square where they were keeping the trophy in view and hero-worshipping and feting the hunters, who were awaiting a lorry from the town. We pushed through the crowd, and begged to be shown the right forepaw of the tiger. Somebody lowered a gas lamp.

Yes, three toes were missing, and a black deep scar marked the spot. The man who cut it off must have driven his knife with the power of a hammer. To a question, the hunters replied :

” Can’t say how it

happens. We’ve met a few instances like this.

It’s said that some forest tribes, if they catch a tiger cub, cut off its claws for some talisman, and let it go.

They do not usually kill cubs.”

10

THE PERFORMING CHILD

THE child was still in bed dreaming : she was given a green railway engine just large enough to accommodate her. She got into it and drove it all over the garden. Near the jasmine plant she stopped it for a while, and put her hand out of the window to pluck flowers, and then the engine took her under the red flowers of a creeper hanging over a wall at the end of the street. And then she drove all by herself to the zoo and all the monkeys there wanted to ride.

Of course there was no room for all of them. She had just enough space for herself and the bald doll.

She applied some hair oil and the doll began to have such long tresses that she braided them and putjasmine into them ; and she clothed the doll in a green frock and the doll said how nice it was. Of course there were bags and bags of sweets scattered all over the floor of the engine... . She was just stooping to pick up a handful of chocolates when mother’s voice called :

“

Kutti ! Kutti ! get up.” And Kutti came out of the dream. ” Get up, it is eight o’clock.’

“

Oh, mother, why did you disturb me now ? It was such a beautiful engine. Just let me sleep again.

The doll wants to go home.”

“

They will be coming now, and you must be ready, my dear. And if they like your dancing they will give you so much money ; you can buy ten dolls and engines.”

76 THE PERFORMING CHILD

“

Is it true, mother ?

“

“

Certainly, dear. Get up. They will give you a lot of money.”

” But I think you will take away all the money ; and I won’t be able to buy what I want.”

“

I promise, you shall have all the money, but only on condition that you dance and sing as you did in your school the other day.”

Two people who were connected with the films had seen Kutti dance and sing in her school and they were now coming to see her. This was a sudden burst of good fortune for the family ; Kutti’s father was a school master earning fifty rupees a month and with it he had to pay for Kutti’s education, pay off instalments of a co-operative debt incurred for his sister’s marriage, and also run the household. For two years this had been a major worry for the family, and it had given Kutti’s father a permanent look of harassment.

And now in a most unexpected manner relief seemed to be coming : the debt could be ticked off ; the pieces of jewellery pledged with a banker could be released and Kutti’s mother could once again hold up her head before her friends.

” How much are

you going to demand ?

“

she often asked her husband

and was told :

” At least ten thousand rupees, not an annas less.”

At nine o’clock the film people arrived. One of them was elderly and wore diamond rings on his fingers, and the other was smart, and wore a tweed suit and rimless glasses ; they took the two rickety chairs offered to them by Kutti’s father. They looked too imposing in this humble home ; the roof seemed to be coining down and touching their heads they gave such an impression of being high and stooping.

THE PERFORMING CHILD 77

They spent a few minutes in inanities and then the smart man said, looking at his watch : ” We’ve not

much time to spare. Will you call up the child ?

“

Kutti came into the hall, dressed for the occasion by her mother : her hair was plaited tight and had flowers ; she wore a chequered silk skirt, and a green jacket, and had a vermilion dot on her forehead.

Her father looked at her with pride.

The elderly man held out a packet of chocolates.

Kutti hesitated, looking at her father for permission.

The elderly man got up and thrust it in her hand and asked,

” Do you like cinemas, child ?

“

“

No,” Kutti replied promptly, leaning on her father’s knees.

“Why not?”

“

Because they are so dark,” replied Kutti. The smart man was viewing her gestures and movements critically. He said as if talking in a dream : “

I’d

like to see her in a frock ; and her hair to be untied.

This old-fashioned dressing makes her look older than she really is. Can’t you put her into a frock now?”

” Now ?

“

asked father in consternation, and told his daughter :

” Get into a frock, Kutti, and undo your hair.”

“

Let it fall down on your neck,” said the smart man.

Kutti looked sullen.

” And where will the flowers be ?

“

she asked.

“

I

must keep the flowers.”

“

All right, let your hair alone,
a frock.”

“

I like this skirt,” said Kutti.

“

Very well ; don’t worry now
it later,” said the smart man.

78 THE PERFORMING CHILD

“

Will you sing the piece you sang in your school the other day, and dance ?

“

“No,” said Kutti. “I’ve forgotten it.” The elderly man fumbled in his pocket and brought out another piece of chocolate.

” And now baby, give us

that song and you can have this.” Kutti looked at her father.

” Go on, sing,” he said, which meant to her by implication

“

Yes, you may accept the chocolate.”

Her mother’s voice said from an inner room : ” Go

on, Kutti, be a good girl.” And Kutti opened her mouth and her shrill voice sang an invitation to Lord Krishna. Her eyes danced as if they beheld Krishna before them ; her arms beckoned him, and her feet were tremulous ; with every muscle in her body she enriched the song. She was a born dancer, a born actress. She could conjure up with her voice, expression, and movement, a vision for others. For a moment that humble room, with its rickety chairs, and fading prints of gods in frames, and dusty floor, acquired the atmosphere of a fairy-land for the gods to come and go : Krishna, an enchanting baby, toddled up and revealed the universe in his mouth when his mother looked in to see if he had put anything in his mouth ; and then when grown up, the leader of a gang of disreputable youngsters keeping the neighbourhood in tantrums ; and then the divine lover wringing the heart of gopis ... and he vanished abruptly, the fairy hall vanished, and the fading prints in frames, and the rickety chairs came into view again when Kutti’s voice ceased. She took breath and looked around at her audience.

The smart man sprang forward, took her in his arms, kissed her, hugged her and would not put her down

THE PERFORMING CHILD 79

He said to his companion :

“

This is a marvellous

child, just the kid for the picture. I shall refuse to go on with your picture unless you take in this kid, understand ?

“

“

Certainly, certainly.”

” We are going now, and coming back at about four in the afternoon, and if you don’t mind I would like to take the kid to the studio and test her before a camera and mike.”

As they were leaving, the elderly man said to Kutti’s father :

” We like your child very much. I hope she will be famous very soon. If you are free, I would like to have a word with you in the evening.”

The whole day the husband and wife could think and talk of nothing but their child. Existence had acquired a sudden smoothness and richness.

“

I suppose this is how the rich people feel,” said Kutti’s father.

” No mortgages, no debts, money for everything.

See here, my girl, I may even throw up this dirty work and do something else. After this picture the baby will be in demand everywhere. I will buy a house for her in the extension.”

” Don’t fail to give her the engine she is asking for, and the doll the bald doll. A girl has one in her school and Kutti has been crying for it night and day.

It seems that it costs about six rupees.”

” Let it cost sixty rupees. Why should we care ?

The child can have it.”

Kutti was dressed and ready at three o’clock. Her mother had taken care to leave her hair free ; and put her into a frock. Kutti was furious.

“

I hate this

frock, mother ; why do you put me into this dirty frock ?

” She said tugging her hair :

“

I want to

80 THE PERFORMING CHILD

have this tied up. You understand ? I don’t care, I don’t care.” Her mother calmed her, and she went out to play in the backyard.

” Take care that you

don’t make yourself dirty,” said her mother.

At four o’clock when the film people arrived Kutti’s father went to the backyard to fetch her. She was not to be seen. He asked his wife : ” Where is Kutti ?

“

” She was in the backyard. She may be in the next house. I will see.” She returned a few minutes later.

” She is not in that house, nor in the next one.

Where could she have gone ?

“

The smart man waited for fifteen minutes and then said :

” We will be in the studio. As soon as you find the child, will you bring her over ?

“

“

Yes,” said Kutti’s father.

Then began a search for Kutti. Her mother wandered up and down the street ; her father went to her school. An hour later they became desperate.

They had looked into every corner of the house, called “

Kutti, Kutti,” a score of times and had gone and enquired in every possible place. Mother became hysterical, threw herself on the floor and began to cry ; father stood in the doorway completely beaten by the mystery. His wife’s despair affected him. He himself wondered if anybody had kidnapped the child.

Such things were common. People were known to give drugged sweets to children and carry them away.

He told his wife,

“

I’ll be back in a moment,” and

went out to have a talk with his friends in the police station. Long after he was gone, his wife after a spasm of weeping got up. She looked again into every corner of every room. At last she noticed a slight stirring in a linen basket kept in an ante-room. She opened the lid and looked in. Kutti was curled up

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at its dark bottom with her unbraided hair covering her face.

” Kutti ! Kutti !

“

the mother screamed,

and rocked the basket. The child didn't stir. The mother dived into it and brought out the child. She carried her in her arms and ran out of the house, down the street.

” My child is dead, take me to a doctor,”

she wailed. Someone took pity on her, and put her into a jutka and took her to the hospital. The doctor felt her pulse and heart, and said, ” She has only

swooned ; you've not been a minute too soon ; don't get excited. She will be all right.” He laid the child on a table. In an hour Kutti sat up and locked her arms around her mother's neck. Mother cried with joy ; and took her in her arms. On the Way home mother asked :

” What made you get into the basket, child ?

“

Kutti paused for a while, and asked with puckered brow :

” Are those people gone ?

“

” Who ?

“

” The cinema men.”

” Yes.”

“

Mother, if they ever come to our house again, I will get into the basket once more and never come out of it.”

Mother hugged her close and said, ” Don’t fear. I will see that they don’t trouble you ever any more.

“

11

ISWARAN

WHEN the whole of the student world in Malgudi was convulsed with excitement, on a certain evening in June when the Intermediate Examination results were being expected, Iswaran went about his business, looking very unconcerned and detached. ‘

He had earned the reputation of having aged in the Intermediate Class. He entered the Intermediate Class in Albert Mission College as a youngster, with faint down on his upper lip. Now he was still there, his figure had grown brawny and athletic, and his chin had become tanned and leathery. Some people even said that you could see grey hairs on his head.

The first time when he failed, his parents sympathized with him, the second time also he managed to get their sympathies, and subsequently they grew more critical and unsparing, and after repeated failures they lost all interest in his examination. He was often told by his parents,

” Why don’t you discontinue your studies, and try to do something useful ?

” He

always pleaded,

” Let me have this one last chance/’

He clung to university education with a ferocious devotion.

And now the whole town was agog with the expectation of the results in the evening. Boys moved about the street in groups ; and on the sands of 8*

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Sarayu they sat in clusters, nervously smiling and biting their finger nails. Others hung about the gates of the senate hall staring anxiously at the walls behind which a meeting was going on.

As much as the boys, if not more, the parents were agitated, except Iswaran's, who, when they heard their neighbours discussing their son's possible future results, remarked with a sigh :

” No such worry for

Iswaran. His results are famous and known to everyone in advance.” Iswaran said facetiously, “

I

have, perhaps, passed this time, father, who knows ?

I did study quite hard.”

“You are the greatest optimist in India at the moment ; but for this obstinate hope you would never have appeared for the same examination every year.”

“

I failed only in Logic, very narrowly, last year,”

he defended himself. At which the whole family laughed.

” In any case, why don't you go and wait along with the other boys, and look up your results ?

“

his mother asked.

” Not at all necessary,”

Iswaran replied.

“

If I pass they will bring home

the news. Do you think I saw my results last year ?

I spent my time in a cinema. I sat through two shows consecutively.”

He hummed as he went in for a wash before dressing to go out. He combed his hair with deliberate care, the more so because he knew everybody looked on him as a sort of an outcast for failing so often. He knew that behind him the whole family and the town were laughing. He felt that they remarked among themselves that washing, combing his hair, and putting on a well-ironed coat, were luxuries too far above his state. He was a failure and had no right to such
84 ISWARAN

luxuries. He was treated as a sort of thick-skinned idiot. But he did not care. He answered their attitude by behaving like a desperado. He swung his arms, strode up and down, bragged and shouted, and went to a cinema. But all this was only a mask.

Under it was a creature hopelessly seared by failure, desperately longing and praying for success. On the day of the results he was, inwardly, in a trembling suspense.

“

Mother,” he said as he went out,

“

don’t

expect me for dinner tonight. I will eat something in a hotel and sit through both the shows at the Palace Talkies.”

Emerging from Vinayak Street, he saw a group of boys moving up the Market Road towards the College.

Someone asked :

“

Iswaran, coming up to see the
results ?”

“

Yes, yes, presently. But now I have to be going on an urgent business.”

” Where ?

“

“Palace Talkies.” At this all the boys laughed.

” You seem to know your result already. Do you ?

“

“

I do. Otherwise do you think I would be celebrating it with a picture ?

“

” What is your number ?

“

” Seven Eight Five,” he said, giving the first set of numbers that came to his head. The group passed onjoking :

” We know you are going to get a first-class this time.”

He sat in a far-off corner in the four-anna class.

He looked about : not a single student in the whole theatre. All the students of the town were near the Senate House, waiting for their results. Iswaran felt very

unhappy to be the only student in the whole theatre. Somehow fate seemed to have isolated him ISWARAN 85

from his fellow-beings in every respect. He felt very depressed and unhappy. He felt an utter distaste for himself.

Soon the lights went out and the show started a Tamil film with all the known gods in it. He soon lost himself in the politics and struggles of gods and goddesses ; he sat rapt in the vision of a heavenly world which some film director had chosen to present.

This felicity of forgetfulness lasted but half an hour.

Soon the heroine of the story sat on a low branch of a tree in paradise and wouldn't move out of the place.

She sat there singing a song for over half an hour.

This portion tired Iswaran, and now there returned all the old pains and gloom.

“

Oh, lady,” Iswaran

appealed.

” Don't add to my troubles, please move on.” As if she heard this appeal the lady moved off, and brighter things followed. A battle, a deluge, somebody dropping headlong from cloudland, and somebody coming up from the bed of an ocean, a rain of fire, a rain of flowers, people dying, people rising from graves, and so on. All kinds of thrills occurred on that white screen beyond the pall of tobacco smoke.

The continuous babble on and off the screen, music and shouting, the cry of pedlars selling soda, the unrestrained comments of the spectators all this din and commotion helped Iswaran to forget the senate house and student life for a few hours.

The show ended at ten o'clock in the night. A crowd was waiting at the gate for the night show.

Iswaran walked across to “Ananda Bhavan” a restaurant opposite to the Palace Talkies. The proprietor, a genial Bombay man, was a friend of his and cried :

” Ishwar Sab, the results were announced today. What about yours ?

“

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“

I did not write any examination this year,”

Iswaran said.

“

Why, why, I thought you did pay your examination fees !

“

Iswaran laughed.

” You are right. I have passed
my Intermediate just this evening.”

“

Ah, how very good. How clever you must be !

If you pray to Hanuman he will always bring you success. What are you going to do next ?

“

“

I will go to a higher class, that is all,” Iswaran said. He ordered a few titbits and coffee and rose to go. As he paid his bill and walked out, the hotel proprietor said,

” Don’t leave me out when you are giving a dinner to celebrate your success.”

Iswaran again purchased a ticket and went back to the picture. Once more all the

strifes and struggles and intrigues of gods were repeated before him. He was once again lost in it. When he saw on the screen some young men of his age singing as they sported in the waters of some distant heaven, he said " Well

might you do it, boys. I suppose, you have no examination where you are ..."

And he was seized with a longing to belong to that world.

Now the leading lady sat on the low branch of a tree and started singing and Iswaran lost interest in the picture. He looked about for the first time. He noticed, in the semi-darkness, several groups of boys in the hall happy groups. He knew that they must all have seen their results, and come now to celebrate their success. There were at least fifty. He knew that they must be a happy and gay lot, with their lips red with chewing betel leaves. He knew that all of them would focus their attention on him the moment lights went up. They would all rag him about his ISWARAN 87

results all the old tedious joking over again, and all the tiresome pose of a desperado. He felt thoroughly sick of the whole business. He would not stand any more of it the mirthful faces of these men of success and their leer. He was certain they would all look on him with the feeling that he had no business to seek the pleasure of a picture on that day.

He moved on to a more obscure corner of the hall.

He looked at the screen, nothing there to cheer him : the leading lady was still there, and he knew she would certainly stay there for the next twenty minutes singing her masterpiece ... He was overcome with dejection. He rose, silently edged towards the exit, and was out of the theatre in a moment. He felt a loathing for himself after seeing those successful boys.

"

I am not fit to live. A fellow who cannot pass an examination ..."

This idea developed in his mind a glorious solution to all difficulties. Die and go to a world where there were young men free from examination who sported in lotus pools in paradise.

No bothers, no disgusting Senate House wall to gaze on hopelessly, year after year. This solution suddenly brought him a feeling of relief. He felt lighter.

He walked across to the hotel. The hotel man was about to rise and go to bed.

“

Saitji,” Iswaran said.

“

Please forgive my troubling you now. Give me a piece of paper and pencil. I have to note down something urgently.”

” So late as this,” said the

hotel man and gave him a slip of paper and a pencil stub. Iswaran wrote down a message for his father, folded the slip, and placed it carefully in the inner pocket of his coat.

He returned the pencil and stepped out of the hotel.

He had only the stretch of the Race Course Road, 88 ISWARAN

and turning to his right, half the Market Road to traverse, and then Ellaman Street, and then Sarayu.

... Its dark swirling waters would close on him and end all his miseries.

“

I must leave this letter in my

coat pocket and remember to leave my coat on the river step,” he told himself.

He was soon out of Ellaman Street. His feet ploughed through the sands of the river bank. He came to the river steps, removed his coat briskly, and went down the steps.

“

Oh, God,” he muttered

with folded hands, looking up at his stars.

“

If I

can't pass an examination even with a tenth attempt, what is the use of my living and disgracing the world ?

“

His feet were in water. He looked over his shoulder at the cluster of university buildings. There was a light burning in the porch of the Senate House. It was nearing midnight. It was a quarter of an hour's walk.

Why not walk across and take a last look at the results board ? In any case he was going to die, and why should he shirk and tremble before the board.

He came out of the water and went up the steps, leaving his coat behind, and he walked across the sand.

Somewhere a time gong struck twelve, stars sparkled overhead, the river flowed on with a murmur ; and miscellaneous night sounds emanated from the bushes on the bank. A cold wind blew on his wet, sand-covered feet. He entered the Senate porch with a defiant heart.

“

I am in no fear of anything here,” he muttered.

The Senate House was deserted, not a sound anywhere.

The whole building was in darkness, except the staircase landing where a large bulb was burning.

And noticeboards hung on the wall.

His heart palpitated as he stood tiptoe to scan the results. By the light of the bulb he scrutinized the ISWARAN 89

numbers. His throat went dry. He looked through the numbers of people who had passed in Third-Class. His own number was 501. The successful number before

him was 498, and after that 703.

“So I have a few friends on either side,” he said with a forced mirth. He had a wild hope as he approached the senate hall that somehow his number would have found a place in the list of successful candidates. He had speculated how he should feel after that... . He would rush home, and demand that they take back all their comments with apologies.

But now after gazing at the noticeboard for quite a while the grim reality of his failure dawned on him, his number was nowhere.

” The river ...” he said.

He felt desolate like a condemned man who had a sudden but false promise of reprieve.

” The river,”

Iswaran muttered.

“

I am going,” he told the noticeboard, and moved a few steps.

“

I haven’t seen how

many have obtained honours.” He looked at the noticeboard once again. He gazed at the top columns of the results. First classes curiously enough a fellow with number one secured a first-class, and six others.

” Good fellows, wonder how they manage it !

” he

said with admiration. His eyes travelled down to second classes it was in two lines starting with 98.

There were about fifteen. He looked fixedly at each number before going on to the next. He came to 350, after that 400, and after that 501 and then 600.

” Five Nought One in Second-Glass ! Can it be true ?

” he shrieked. He looked at the number again and again. Yes, there it was. He had obtained a second-class.

“

If this is true I shall sit in the B.A.

class next month,” he shouted. His voice rang through the silent building.

“

I will flay alive anyone who

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calls me a fool hereafter ...” he proclaimed. He felt slightly giddy. He leant against the wall. Years of strain and suspense were suddenly relaxed ; and he could hardly bear the force of this release. Blood raced along his veins and heaved and knocked under his skull. He steadied himself with an effort. He softly hummed a tune to himself. He felt he was the sole occupant of the world and its overlord. He thumped his chest and addressed the noticeboard : ” Know who I am ?

” He stroked an imaginary

moustache arrogantly, laughed to himself, and asked, “

Is the horse ready, groom ?

” He threw a supercilious

side glance at the noticeboard and strutted out like a king. He stood on the last step of the porch and looked for his steed. He waited for a minute and commanded,

“

Fool, bring the horse nearer. Do you hear ?

” The horse was brought nearer. He made a movement as if mounting and whipped his horse into a fury. His voice rang through the dark river side, urging the horse on. He swung his arms and ran along the sands. He shouted at the top of his voice ; “

Keep off ; the king is coming ; whoever comes his way will be trampled ...”

“

I have five hundred and one horses,” he spoke to the night. The number stuck in his mind and kept coming up again and again. He ran the whole length of the river bank up and down. Somehow this did not satisfy him. ” Prime Minister,” he

said.

“

This

horse is no good. Bring me the other five hundred and one horses, they are all in second-classes “

He gave a kick to the horse which he had been riding and drove it off. Very soon the Prime Minister brought him another horse. He mounted it with dignity, and said,

” This is better.” Now he galloped ISWARAN 91

about on his horse. It was a strange sight. In the dim star light, alone at that hour, making a tap-tap with his tongue to imitate galloping hoofs. With one hand swinging and tugging the reins, and with the other stroking his moustache defiantly he urged the horse on and on until it attained the speed of a storm.

He felt like a conqueror as the air rushed about him.

Soon he crossed the whole stretch of sand. He came to the water’s edge, hesitated for a moment and whispered to his horse :

” Are you afraid of water ?

You must swim across, otherwise I will never pay five nought one rupees for you.” He felt the horse make a leap.

Next afternoon his body came up at a spot about a quarter of a mile down the course of the river. Meanwhile some persons had already picked up the coat left on the step, and discovered in the inner pocket the slip of paper with the inscription : ” My dear father : By the time you see this letter I shall be at the bottom of Sarayu. I don’t want to live. Don’t worry about me. You have other sons who are not such dunces as I am “

HE had a most curious occupation in life. Having failed in every effort he had to accept it with gratitude and enthusiasm ; he received thirty rupees a month for it. He lived on fifteen rupees in a cheap hotel, where he was given a sort of bunk on the loft, with rafters touching his head. He saved fifteen rupees for paying off the family loan in the village incurred over his sister's marriage. He added a rupee or two to his income by filling money order forms and postcards for unlettered villagers, whom he met on the post office veranda. But his main work was very odd. His business consisted in keeping a wealthy drunkard company. This wealthy man wanted some one to check his drink after nine in the evening, and take him home. Sankar's physique qualified him for this task.

" Don't hesitate to use force on me if necessary," his employer had told him. But it was never done. Sankar did all that he could by persuasion and it was a quite familiar sight at the Oriental Cafe Bar the wrangling going on between the employer and his servant. But Sankar with a margin of five minutes always succeeded in wresting the gentleman from his cups and pushing him into his car. On the following morning he was asked :

" What time did we

reach home last night ?

"

" Nine fifteen, sir

"

" Did you have much trouble ?

"

9*

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"No,

" Nine fifteen ! very good, very good. I'm glad.

On no account should you let me stay on beyond nine, even if I am in company

“

“

Yes, sir.”

” You may go now, and be sure to be back in the evening in time

“

That finished his morning duty. He went back to his garret, slept part of the day, loitered about post offices, courts, etc., and returned to work at six o’clock.

” Come on,” said his employer who waited for him on the veranda, and Sankar got into the front seat of the car and they drove off to the Oriental Cafe.

Today he was in a depressed state, he felt sick of his profession, the perpetual cajoling and bullying, the company of a drunkard. He nearly made up his mind to throw up this work and go back to the village.

A nostalgia for his home and people seized him.

“

I

don’t care what happens, I will get back home and do something else to earn this money.” On top of this mood a letter from home : ” Send a hundred

rupees immediately. Last date for mortgage instalment.

Otherwise we shall lose our house ” He

was appalled ! Where could he find the money ?

What was the way out ? He cursed his lot more than ever. He sat for a long time thinking of a way out.

” Our good old home ! Let it go if it is to go.”

It was their last possession in this world. If it went, his mother, brothers, and his little sister would have to wander about without a roof over their heads.

But could he find a hundred rupees ? What did they mean by putting it off till the last moment? He cursed his lot for being the eldest son of a troubled family.

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He swung into duty as usual. He held the curtain apart for his master as he entered the cubicle. He pressed a bell. He might be a machine, doing this thing for thirty days in the month for nearly twelve months now. The waiter appeared. No talk was necessary. Sankar nodded. The waiter went away and returned a few minutes later with an unopened flat bottle, a soda, and a glass tumbler ; placed these on the table and withdrew.

“

Bring this master a lemon squash,” the gentleman said.

“

No, sir

” Sankar would reply ; this ritual was repeated every day. Now Sankar’s business would be to pour out a measure of drink into the tumbler, push it up, and place the soda near at hand, go out on to the veranda, and read a newspaper there (with the flat bottle in his pocket), and stay there till he was called in again to fill the glass. By about ten to nine the last ounce of drink would be poured out, and Sankar would sit down opposite to his master instead of going out to the veranda. This was a sort of warning bell.

” Why do you sit here ? Go to the veranda.”

“

I like this place, sir, and I will sit here.”

“

It is not time for you to come in yet.”

“Just ten minutes more, sir.”

“

Nonsense. It is just seven o'clock."

" About two hours ago

"

" You people seem to turn up the clock just as you like let me see how much is left in the bottle "

"Nothing," Sankar said, holding up the bottle.

" The last drop was poured out." He held up the bottle and the other became furious at the sight of it.

"

I think," he said with deep suspicion, "

there is

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some underhand transaction going on I don't know what you have been doing in the veranda with the bottle

" Sankar learnt not to answer these charges. As the clock struck nine, he tapped the other's shoulder and said,

"

Please finish your drink

and get up, sir

" "What do you mean by it ?

I'm not getting up. Who are you to order me ?

"

Sankar had to be firm.

” Look here, don’t you be a fool and imagine I am talking in drink. I am dead sober leave me alone “

Sankar persisted. “

I dismiss you today, you are no longer in my service. I don’t want a disobedient fool for a companion, get out

“

Usually Sankar sat through it

without replying, and when the drink was finished he gently pulled the other up and led the way to the car, and the other followed, scowling at him with red eyes and abusing him wildly. Today when his employer said,

“

I dismiss you, get out this minute “

Sankar replied,

” How can you dismiss me all of a sudden ! Must I starve ?

“

” No. I will give you four months’ salary if you get out this moment.” Sankar thought over it.

” Don’t sit there. Make up your mind quickly “

said his master. One hundred and twenty rupees !

twenty rupees more than the debt. He could leave for his village and give the cash personally to his mother, and leave his future to God. He brushed aside this vision, shook his head and said : “

No, sir. You

have got to get up now, sir.”

” Get out of my

service

“

shouted his master. He rang the bell

and shouted for the waiter,

” Get me another

“

Sankar protested to the waiter.

” Get out of here

“

cried his master.

” You think I’m speaking in drink.

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I don't want you. I can look after myself. If you don't leave me, I will tell the waiter to neck you out

" Sankar stood baffled.

"

Now, young man

" He took out his wallet :

" What is your

salary ?

"

"

Thirty rupees, sir."

"

Here's your four-months'. Take it and be off. I have some business meeting here, and I will go home just when I like, there is the car." He held out a hundred-rupee note and two tens. Mortgage instalment.

How can I take it? A conflict raged in Sankar's mind, and he finally took the money and said :

" Thank you very much, sir."

" Don't mention it."

" You are very kind."

"Just ordinary duty, that is all. My principle is *Do unto others as you would be*

done by others ‘

is

my principle is do. ... You need not come in the morning. I've no need for you. I had you only as a temporary arrangement I'll put in a word for you if any friend wants a clerk or something of the sort

“

“

Good-bye, sir.”

“

Good-bye.” He was gone. The gentleman looked after him with satisfaction, muttering : ” My

principle is ... unto other... .”

Next morning Sankar went out shopping, purchased bits of silk for his younger sister, a pair of spectacles for his mother and a few painted tin toys for the child at home. He went to the hotel, looked into the accounts, and settled his month's bill. “I'm leaving today,” he said.

“

I am returning to my

village... .” His heart was all aflame with joy. He paid a rupee to the servant as tip. He packed up his THE EVENING GIFT 97

trunk and bed, took a last look round his garret ; had an unaccountable feeling of sadness at leaving the familiar smoke-stained cell. He was at the bus stand at about eleven in the day. The bus was ready to start. He took his seat. He would be at home at six in the evening. What a surprise for his mother !

He would chat all night and tell them about the drunkard... .

He was shaken out of this reverie. A police inspector standing at the foot-board

of the bus touched his shoulder and asked :

” Are you Sankar ?

“

“

Yes.”

” Get down and follow me.”

“

I am going to my village... .”

” You can’t go now.” The inspector placed the trunk and bed on a coolie’s head and they marched to the police station. There Sankar was subjected to much questioning, and his pockets were searched and all his money was taken away by the inspector. The inspector scrutinized the hundred-rupee note and remarked :

” Same number. How did you get this ?

Be truthful... .”

Presently the inspector got up and said : “

Follow

me to the gentleman’s house... .” Sankar found his employer sitting in a chair in the veranda, with a very tired look on his face. He motioned the inspector to a chair and addressed Sankar in a voice full of sorrow.

“

I never knew you were this sort, Sankar.

You robbed me when I was not aware of it. If you’d asked me I’d have given you any amount you wanted.

Did you have to tie me up and throw me down ?

“

he

showed the bruises on his arm.

” In addition to

robbing ?

” Sankar stood aghast. He could hardly 13

A SNAKE IN THE GRASS

ON a sunny afternoon, when the inmates of the bungalow were at their siesta a cyclist rang his bell at the gate frantically and announced : “A big cobra has got into your compound. It crossed my wheel.” He pointed to its track under the gate, and resumed his journey.

The family consisting of the mother and her four sons assembled at the gate in great agitation. The old servant Dasa was sleeping in the shed. They shook him out of his sleep and announced to him the arrival of the cobra.

” There is no cobra,” he replied and tried to dismiss the matter. They swore at him and forced him to take an interest in the cobra.

” The

thing is somewhere here. If it is not found before the evening, we will dismiss you. Your neglect of the garden and the lawns is responsible for all these dreadful things coming in.” Some neighbours dropped in. They looked accusingly at Dasa : ” You have

the laziest servant on earth,” they said.

” He ought

to keep the surroundings tidy.”

“

I have been asking

for a grass-cutter for months,” Dasa said. In one voice they ordered him to manage with the available things and learn not to make demands. He persisted.

They began to speculate how much it would cost to buy a grass-cutter. A neighbour declared that you could not think of buying any article made of iron

100

A SNAKE IN THE GRASS 101

till after the war. He chanted banalities of wartime prices. The second son of the house asserted that he could get anything he wanted at controlled prices.

The neighbour became eloquent on black-market. A heated debate followed. The rest watched in apathy.

At this point the college-boy of the house butted in with :

“

I read in an American paper that 30,000

people die of snake-bite every year.” Mother threw up her arms in horror and arraigned Dasa. The boy elaborated the statistics.

“

I have worked it out, 83

a day. That means every twenty minutes someone is dying of cobra-bite. As we have been talking here, one person has lost his life somewhere.” Mother nearly screamed on hearing it. The compound looked sinister. The boys brought in bamboo-sticks and pressed one into the hands of the servant also. He kept desultorily poking it into the foliage with a cynical air.

” The fellow is beating about the bush,” someone cried aptly. They tucked up their dhoties, seized every available knife and crow-bar and began to hack the garden. Creepers, bushes, and lawns, were laid low.

What could not be trimmed was cut to the root. The inner walls of the house brightened with the unobstructed glare streaming in. When there was nothing more to be done Dasa asked triumphantly, "Where is the snake ?

"

An old beggar cried for alms at the gate. They told her not to pester when they were engaged in a snake-hunt. On hearing it the old woman became happy.

"You are fortunate. It is God Subramanya who has come to visit you. Don't kill the snake/'

Mother was in hearty agreement :

"You are right.

I forgot all about the promised Abhishckam. This is a reminder." She gave a coin to the beggar, who 102 A SNAKE IN THE GRASS

promised to send down a snake-charmer as she went.

Presently an old man appeared at the gate and announced himself as a snake-charmer. They gathered around him. He spoke to them of his life and activities and his power over snakes. They asked admiringly : "How do you catch them?" "Thus," he said, pouncing upon a hypothetical snake on the ground. They pointed the direction in which the cobra had gone and asked him to go ahead. He looked helplessly about and said :

"

If you show me the snake, I'll at once catch it. Otherwise what can I do ? The moment you see it again, send for me. I live nearby." He gave his name and address and departed.

At five in the evening, they threw away their sticks and implements and repaired to the veranda to rest.

They had turned up every stone in the garden and cut down every grass-blade and shrub, so that the tiniest insect coming into the garden should have no cover.

They were loudly discussing the various measures they would take to protect themselves against reptiles in the future, when Dasa appeared before them carrying a water-pot whose mouth was sealed with a slab of stone. He put the pot down and said : “

I have

caught him in this. I saw him peeping out of it... .

I saw him before he could see me.” He explained at length the strategy he had employed to catch and seal up the snake in the pot. They stood at a safe distance and gazed on the pot. Dasa had the glow of a champion on his face.

” Don’t call me an idler

hereafter,” he said. Mother complimented him on his sharpness and wished she had placed some milk in the pot as a sort of religious duty. Dasa picked up the pot cautiously and walked off saying that he would .

leave the pot with its contents with the snake-charmer A SNAKE IN THE GRASS 103

living nearby. He became the hero of the day. They watched him in great admiration and decided to reward him adequately.

It was five minutes since Dasa was gone when the youngest son cried :

” See there !

” Out of a hole

in the compound wall a cobra emerged. It glided along towards the gate, paused for a moment to look at the gathering in the veranda with its hood halfopen.

It crawled under the gate and disappeared along a drain. When they recovered from the shock they asked,

” Does it mean that there are two snakes here ?

” The college-boy murmured :

“

I wish I had

taken the risk and knocked the water-pot from Dasa's hand ; we might have known what it contained.”

14

AN ACCIDENT

I

WAS returning from the hill temple where I had been held up till nearly nine o'clock. I had driven the car down the hill, turned to my left, and gone a few yards further skirting the base of the hill when the engine sighed and spluttered, the whole car jerked and rocked and then came to a dead stop. The hill loomed over me, jackals wailed in the dark. I faithfully got down, went round the car, opened the bonnet, and gazed in. What was the use ? I knew nothing about a car's inside. My car was usually well-behaved ; and occasionally when it had some trouble I had it pushed to the nearest workshop. Now I went round and round, opened and closed the bonnet, and made futile efforts to start the car. I soon realized that I should be a fool to be going round, prodding here and there, hoping that it could be started somehow. I sat down on the running board, blinking, and hoping that some motorist would come along and help me. The time passed, and not a sign of a human being. The wind rattled the side screen, and unseen insects hummed and whirled about. I had a feeling that I was on some strange planet with myself as the only human being on it.

Presently I said to myself,

“

I will count ten and if

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the car does not start by then I will abandon her and walk home.”

I looked at the ground and counted, “

One, two,

three ...” I believe after I reached eight or nine I went back to one and counted up ; back and forth untiringly like an auctioneer. After counting half a dozen times thus I turned and saw a shadowy figure at my side. I was startled.

” When did you come here ? Who are you ?

“

“

I came here a moment ago, sir.”

“

I didn’t hear you coming. Who are you ?

“

” My name is Anil Doss, and I am a driver, sir.”

” Motor driver ?

“

“

Yes.”

It seemed incredible that the Gods should have taken so seriously my threat to abandon the car, and sent a mechanic along.

” Where are you coming from ?

“

“

I am usually here, sir.”

” You said you were a driver.”

” The car was smashed and I have been without a car since.”

” But what do you do for a living ?

“

” Oh ! There is no difficulty about that.”

I thought he was mad or slightly drunk, and did not seriously bother to cross-examine him.

” Look

here, Ami Doss, my car has suddenly broken down.

I don’t know what is wrong. Can you help me start it?”

He opened the bonnet and examined the engine.

He put his head into the car and unscrewed the switchboard.

” Arc you able to see anything ?

“

I asked.

“

Oh, quite well,” he said.

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“

It is so dark !

“

I said, the only light we had

being the glare of cloud edges catching the city lights.

He came out and declared his diagnosis : ” Loose

contact, jet trouble... .”

“

I had it overhauled only a few months ago. It can't be. The car came down so far all right ; all this can't have happened just on this spot ?

“

“

Oh, yes. Worse things have happened here. It is a bad place, sir.”

” What do you mean by bad ?

“

“

Well, things happen here to a car which we can't understand. It is a bad place, sir.”

” Do you tell me that as soon as a car passes this spot its wires snap, its jet is choked, and the battery is run down ?

“

“

Yes, sir.”

“

It is amazing !

“

I said.

“

It is terrible, sir. For instance, at this very spot my car was smashed, an Austin sedan, hardly a month old.”

I remembered the accident. A few months ago an Austin coming down the hill after nightfall dashed against a boulder and was smashed to bits.

” Were you the driver of the car ?

“

I asked.

“

Yes, sir.”

” But wasn’t he killed in the accident ?

“

“

No,” he said. It seemed to me another instance of the drunken condition of this man. He seemed to be posing for someone else.

“

Will you make my car move on the road again ?

“

“

Yes, sir. I will do my best.”

“

I will give you two rupees for the service.”

He lifted the front seat, picked up the tools, and got under the car for a moment ; came out and AN ACCIDENT 107

buried his head into the bonnet. The only noise for a while was the noise he made with the tools, and his heavy breathing ; and of course the wind rattled the side screen. ... A quarter of an hour later he started the engine, drove the car a few yards forward, and reversed.

” You will have no more trouble, sir.

Only, as soon as possible, please change the piston rings,” he said. He opened the door and came out of the car muttering.

“

I have been a driver for

twentyfive years, and it pains me when I see a car suffer. For all the twentyfive years I have served only two masters. With the first I stayed for only four years, and with the other for over twenty years.

The Austin was the fourth car that my master bought in the twenty years. I was with him since the day he changed from a horse carriage to an Overland of those days. I have loved motor-cars, whatever the make, as no one else can ever love them. If I saw anyone make the slightest scratch on a mudguard I slapped his cheek though he might be an emperor’s son. And do you think I would have wilfully dashed and smashed an Austin, which was only a month old ?

They say I was drunk. I swear I was not. I have occasionally taken a drink, but I swear I was not drunk that day. Will you kindly go to my master “

he gave me an address

” and tell him that I wasn’t

drunk and that the accident happened because of the evil nature of the place.” ”
Such a bad accident ?

“

I asked.

” You know what this spot can do, but your luck was better than that of the Austin.”

I held up two rupees to him. He refused the money.

“

It is no use to me, sir,” he said.

“

I have

greater use for your good-will. If you will have the io8 AN ACCIDENT

kindness to see my master and tell him that I wasn’t drunk, I shall be very grateful to you, sir.”

I offered him a lift. He declined it. I pressed the self-starter. The engine hummed. I switched on the lights.

The car behaved so well that I was filled with great admiration for the mechanic, and I decided to see his so-called master next day.

I traced the owner of the wrecked Austin. I conveyed to him the driver’s message.

” Are you sure it was he ?

” he asked.

“

I don’t know. He seemed to be slightly drunk and might be an impostor. But after

all, it might be the same fellow. He gave me your address, and it seems he had been with you for twenty years and that you had an Overland once. ...”

“

All that is true, no doubt, but I am puzzled.

Anil’s skull was jammed when we picked him up, and we carried his remains in a basket and buried him.

(What remained of the car could also have been put in a basket.) ... Don’t contradict me ; the fellow was drunk. I had caught him several times and warned him. I knew all along that he would come to a bad end.”

15

SUCH PERFECTION

A SENSE of great relief filled Soma as he realized that his five years of labour were coming to an end. He had turned out scores of images in his lifetime, but he had never done any work to equal this.

He often said to himself that long after the Deluge had swept the earth this Nataraja would still be standing on His pedestal.

No other human being had seen the image yet.

Soma shut himself in and bolted all the doors and windows and plied his chisel by the still flame of a mud lamp, even when there was a bright sun outside.

It made him perspire unbearably, but he did not mind it so long as it helped him to keep out prying eyes. He worked with a fierce concentration and never encouraged anyone to talk about it.

After all, his labours had come to an end. He sat back, wiped the perspiration off his face, and surveyed his handiwork with great satisfaction. As he looked on he was overwhelmed by the majesty of this image.

He fell prostrate before it, praying, “

I have taken

five years to make you. May you reside in our temple and bless all human beings !

” The dim mud

flame cast subtle shadows on the image, and gave it an undertone of rippling life. The sculptor stood lost in this vision. A voice said,

” My friend, never take

this image out of this room. It is too perfect... .”

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no SUCH PERFECTION

Soma trembled with fear. He looked round. He saw a figure crouching in a dark corner of the room it was a man. Soma dashed forward and clutched him by the throat :

” Why did you come here ?

“

The other writhed under the grip and replied : ” Out

of admiration for you. I have always loved your work. I have waited for five years... .”

” How did you come in ?

“

” With another key while you were eating inside... .”

Soma gnashed his teeth.

“

Shall I strangle you

before this God and offer you as sacrifice ?

” “

By

all means/5

replied the other,

“

if it will help you in

any way ... but I doubt it. Even with a sacrifice you cannot take it out. It is too perfect. Such perfection is not for mortals.” The sculptor wept : “

Oh, do not say that. I worked in secrecy only for this perfection. It is for our people. It is a God coming into their midst. Don’t deny them that.”

The other prostrated before the image and prayed aloud,

” God give us the strength to bear your presence... .”

This man spoke to people and the great secret was out. A kind of dread seized the people of the village. On an auspicious day, Soma went to the temple priest and asked,

” At the coming

Full Moon my Nataraja must be consecrated. Have you made a place for him in the temple ?

” The

priest answered,

“

Let me see the image first... .”

He went over to the sculptor’s house, gazed on the image, and said,

“

This perfection, this God, is not for mortal eyes. He will blind us. At the first chant of prayer before him, he will dance ... and we shall be wiped out... .” The sculptor looked so SUCH PERFECTION in

unhappy that the priest added, “Take your chisel and break a little toe or some other part of the image, and it will be safe... .” The sculptor replied that he would sooner crack the skull of his visitor... .

The leading citizens of the village came over and said,

” Don’t mistake us. We cannot give your image a place in our temple. Don’t be angry with us. We have to think of the safety of all the people in the village... . Even now if you are prepared to break a small finger ...”

” Get out, all of you,” Soma shouted.

“

I don’t

care to bring this Nataraja to your temple. I will make a temple for him where he is. You will see that it becomes the greatest temple on earth... .”

Next day he pulled down a portion of the wall of the room and constructed a large doorway opening on the street. He called Rama, the tom-tom beater, and said,

“

I will give you a silver coin for your trouble. Go and proclaim in all nearby villages that this Nataraja will be consecrated at the Full Moon. If a large crowd turns up, I will present you with a lace shawl... .”

At the Full Moon, men, women and children poured in from the surrounding

villages. There was hardly an inch of space vacant anywhere. The streets were crammed with people. Vendors of sweets and toys and flowers shouted their wares, moving about in the crowd. Pipers and drummers, groups of persons chanting hymns, children shouting in joy, men greeting each other all this created a mighty din. Fragrance of flowers and incense hung over the place. Presiding over all this there was the brightest moon that ever shone on earth.

The screen which had covered the image parted.

SUCH PERFECTION

A great flame of camphor was waved in front of the image, and bronze bells rang. A silence fell upon the crowd. Every eye was fixed upon the image.

In the flame of the circling camphor Nataraja's eyes lit up. His limbs moved, his anklets jingled. The crowd was awe-stricken. The God pressed one foot on Earth and raised the other in dance. He destroyed the Universe under his heel, and smeared the ashes over his body, and the same God rattled the drum in his hand and by its rhythm set life in motion again... . Creation, Dissolution, and God, attained a meaning now ; this image brought it out ... the bells rang louder every second. The crowd stood stunned by this vision vouchsafed to them... .

At this moment a wind blew from the east. The Moon's disc gradually dimmed. The wind gathered force, clouds blotted out the moon ; people looked up and saw only pitch-like darkness above. Lightning flashed, thunder roared, and fire poured down from the sky. It was a thunderbolt striking a haystack and setting it ablaze. Its glare illuminated the whole village. People ran about in panic, searching for shelter. The population of ten villages crammed in that village. Another thunderbolt hit a house. Women and children shrieked and wailed. The fires descended with a tremendous hiss as a mighty rain came down. It rained as it had never rained before. The two lakes, over which the village road ran, filled, swelled, and joined over the road. Water flowed along the streets. The wind screamed and shook the trees and the homes. “

This is the end of the world !

“

wailed the people through the storm.

The whole of the next day it was still drizzling.

Soxna sat before the image, with his head bowed in SUCH PERFECTION 113

thought. Trays and flowers and offerings lay scattered under the image, damped by rain. Some of his friends came wading in water, stood before him, and asked,

” Are you satisfied ?

“

They stood over him

like executioners and repeated the question and added,

” Do you want to know how many lives have been lost, how many homes washed out, and how many were crushed by storm ?

“

“

No, no, I don’t want to know anything,” Soma replied.

” Go away. Don’t stand here and talk.”

” God has shown us only a slight sign of his power.

Don’t tempt Him again. Do something. Our lives are in your hands. Save us, the image is too perfect.”

After they were gone he sat for hours in the same position, ruminating. Their words still troubled him.

” Our lives are in your hands.” He knew what they meant. Tears gathered in his eyes.

” How can I

mutilate this image? Let the whole world burn, I don’t care. I can’t touch this image.” He lit a lamp before the God and sat watching. Far off the sky rumbled.

“

It is starting again. Poor human

beings, they will all perish this time.” He looked at the toe of the image. “Just one neat stroke with the chisel, and all troubles will end.” He watched the toe, his hands trembled.

” How can I ?

“

Outside

the wind began to howl. People were gathering in front of his house and were appealing to him for help.

Soma prostrated before the God and went out.

He stood looking at the road over which the two lakes had joined. Over the eastern horizon a dark mass of cloud was rolling up.

” When that cloud

comes over, it will wash out the world. Nataraja !

I cannot mutilate your figure, but I can offer myself as a sacrifice if it will be any use... .” He shut ii4 SUCH PERFECTION

his eyes and decided to jump into the lake. He checked himself.

“

I must take a last look at the

God before I die.” He battled his way through the oncoming storm. The wind shrieked. Trees shook and trembled. Men and cattle ran about in panic.

He was back just in time to see a tree crash on the roof of his house.

” My home,” he cried, and ran in.

He picked up his Nataraja from amidst splintered tiles and rafters. The image was unhurt except for a little toe which was found a couple of yards off, severed by a falling splinter. ” God himself has done this to save us !

“

people

cried.

The image was installed with due ceremonies at the temple on the next Full Moon. Wealth and honours were showered on Soma. He lived to be ninety-five, but he never touched his mallet and chisel again.

16

A CAREER

THE Talkative Man said :

Years and years ago I had a shop. It was in those days when Lawley Extension was not what it is now. It consisted of less than a hundred houses.

Market Road being at least a mile off, the people living in the Extension looked on me as a saviour when I took up a little building, and on an auspicious day hung up a large board with the inscription : The National Provision Stores. I went from house to house and secured orders. I literally examined every pantry in the Extension and filled up the gaps. When the bell rang for the midday interval at the Extension Elementary School, children swarmed into my shop and carried off whatever sweets, ribbons and fancy stationery I happened to keep. I did about twentyfive rupees credit and ten rupees cash sales every day.

This gave us at least fifty rupees a month to live on.

We paid a rent of five rupees and took a small house in Kabir Street, which was over a mile from my shop.

I left at seven in the morning and returned home only at nine in the evening, after clearing the daily accounts.

A year and a half passed thus. One day a young fellow presented himself at my shop. He looked about twenty, very fair and bright. He wore a spotless dhoti and shirt.

“5

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” What can I do for you ?

“

I asked, taking him
to be a young customer.

In answer he brought his palms together in salute and said,

“

I need your help, sir. I will do whatever work you may give me in return for a little food and shelter and kindness.”

There was something in the young fellow’s personality which appealed to me. Moreover, he had on his forehead three-finger width of sacred ash and a dot of vermilion between his eyebrows. He looked as if he had just come from a temple.

“

I am very God-fearing, sir, and susceptible to religious influences.”

I spoke to him for about an hour.

He said he belonged to a family of wealthy landholders in a village near Trichinopoly. His mother died some years before. His father took a mistress who ill-treated the boy and consequently he ran away from home.

A touching story I felt.

I directed him to my house. When I went home in the evening I found that he

had already made himself a great favourite there. His life story had deeply moved my wife.

” So young !

“

she whispered to me,

” and to think

that he should be left at this age without a father or a mother !

“

she sighed. He had made himself

lovable in a dozen ways already. He had taken my little son out for a walk. The youngster cried as soon as he came home,

“

Let Ramu stay in our house.

He is great. He knows magic and can tame tigers and elephants.” Ramu walked into the kitchen and offered assistance. At first my wife protested, ” Why won’t you allow me to go near the oven, A CAREER 117

Mother ?

” he asked.

“

Is it because you think I

can’t cook ? Give me a chance and see.”

He made a dash for the bathroom, turned the tap on himself, and came out dripping. He took a handful of sacred ash and smeared it on his forehead. My wife was tremendously impressed. She let him do the cooking.

He prepared delicious food for us. We were all very pleased. After that he helped my wife with all the cleaning and scrubbing. He slept at night on the bare floor, refusing the mat and the pillow we offered.

He was the first to be up next morning. He lit the stove and woke up my wife. At midday he brought me my food. While I ate he attended to the school children, who came into the shop. He handed them their knick-knacks with an expert hand. He charmed and amused them. He made them laugh. He beguiled them with an alternative when he had not on hand what they wanted.

It was inevitable that in a month he should be sharing with me the shop work. He had attractive ways about him. Customers liked to talk to him.

Within a short time there was not a single home in the Extension where he was not treated as a member of the family. He knew the inside story of every family. He served every one to the best of his capacity.

Here he helped a man with his garden, and there he pleaded with a housebuilding contractor and had an estimate revised. He patched up quarrels. He tamed truants and sent them to school. He took part in all the extra-curricular activities of the Extension Elementary School. He took an interest in the Club Movement. He dressed himself up for the occasion when the inspector visited the school, and arranged u8 A CAREER

for the supply of garlands and flowers. And all this in addition to assisting me in the shop. He went every day to the market and purchased provisions from the wholesale merchants, sat down for hours on end in the shop and handed out things to customers, pored over the accounts till late at night, and collected all the bills.

As a result of Ramu's presence my business increased nearly tenfold. I had abundant rest now, I left the shop entirely in his hands. I went home for food at midday. After that I slept till three in the afternoon.

And then I went to the shop, but stayed there only till five o'clock, when I went to an open space near by and played badminton with some friends. I came to the shop again only at seven in the evening.

Once or twice I and my wife talked over the matter and tried to fix up a monthly pay for Ramu. We felt we ought not to be exploiting Ramu's friendliness.

But when the subject was mentioned Ramu grew red in the face and said,
“

If you don't want me to stay

with you any more, you may talk of salary again... .”

Five years passed thus. He aged with us. He lived with us through all our joys and sorrows. I had four children now. My business had prospered enormously. We were now living in a bigger house in the same street. I took the shop building on a long lease. I had an immense stock of all kinds of provisions and goods.

I extended my business. I purchased large quantities of butter in all the nearby villages and sold them to butter and ghee merchants in Madras. This business gave me large profits. It kept me running between the villages and Madras. The shop was entirely in Ramu's hands.

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At Madras I used to stop with a merchant in George Town. Once work kept me on there a little longer than I had anticipated. One evening just as I was starting out to post a letter for Ramu, a telegraph messenger stepped off his cycle and gave me an envelope. I tore open the cover and read : “

Father

dying of cholera. Must go at once. Return immediately.

Ramu.”

The next morning at five o'clock I got down at Malgudi. Ramu was at the station. He was going to Trichinopoly by the same train. The train halted only for a few minutes. Red-eyed and sobbing Ramu said,

” My father, father, cholera. Never thought he would get it... .” I consoled him. I had never seen him so broken. I said feebly, ” He will be all

right, don't worry. ...” I had hardly the heart to ask him about the shop. He himself said, “

I have

handed the keys to mother, and all the accounts and cash also... .”

“

All right, all right, I will look to all that. Don’t worry,” I said.

The guard blew his whistle. Ramu jumped into a third class compartment. The train jerked forward.

He put his head out of the window and said, “

I will

be back tomorrow by the night train, if my father gets better... . Whatever happens, I won’t be away for more than fifteen days. Kittu has asked me to bring him ...” his voice and face receded ” a

wooden elephant on wheels. Please tell him that I will surely bring it. My namaskarams to mother... .”

Tears rolled down his cheeks. Even long after the train had left the platform he was still looking out of the window and gesticulating to indicate “

I will

surely be back soon... .”

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Having some unfinished Madras business on hand, I could hardly go near the shop for a week. When I reopened, the first thing that I noticed was that the shop was empty. Except for a bag of coarse rice and a few bars of cheap soap, all the racks and containers were empty. I picked up the books and examined them. The entries were all in a mess. I put them away. Replenishing the stock was more urgent. I made out a list and went to the market.

Sadik Sait, my wholesale supplier, squatted amidst his cushions and welcomed me warmly. I owed my start in life to the unlimited credit he allowed me.

After some preliminary, inconsequential talk, I put before him the list. He scrutinized it gloomily and shook his head. He said,

” You want goods for about

three hundred rupees. I wouldn’t advise you to put up your dues. Why don’t you take fifty-rupees worth now? I am suggesting this only for your own convenience ...” This was the first time in my life that he had spoken to me in this manner. And he explained,

” Don’t mistake me, friend. You are a business man, so am I. No use talking indirectly and vaguely. I will tell you what the matter is. Your account with us stands at Rs. 3,500 and if you had paid at least a single instalment for these three months, we should have felt happier... .”

“But, Sait, last month I sent four-hundred to be given to you, and the month before three-hundred and fifty, and the month before... . There must be only a balance of. ...” He took out his ledger.

There was only one payment made for four months when the bill stood at about a thousand. After that there had been purchases almost every day for about forty rupees.

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” The young fellow said that business was very brisk and that you would clear

the accounts when you returned from Madras.”

My head swam. “

I will see you again,

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I said,

and went back to the shop.

I once again examined the books. The pages showed a lot of arrears to be collected. Next day I went round to collect all my bills. People looked surprised,

” There must be some mistake. We paid our bills completely a fortnight ago. Otherwise Ramu wouldn’t leave us in peace.”

My wife said,

” In your absence he was coming home nearly at twelve every night. He used to tell me that the accounts kept him late.

‘ How was business

today ?

‘ I unfailingly asked every day. He replied, 6 Business is good, bad, good and bad. Don’t worry.

Leave it all to me. I will manage.’

“

An old man of Lawley Extension asked me, ” Where is that boy you had ?

“

I told him.

” Look here,” the old man said.

“

Keep this to

yourself. You remember there lived next door to us those people from Hyderabad ?

“

“

Yes, yes... .”

” Your boy was gadding about with them a little too much. You know there was a tall, pretty girl with them. Your fellow was taking her out every evening in a taxi. He closed the shop promptly at six in the evening. Those people went back to Hyderabad a few days ago.”

Later on I made enquiries in Market Road and learnt that Ramu had had stitched four tweed suits, eighteen silk shirts and other clothes worth about a hundred rupees, purchased leather suitcases, four pairs 122 A CAREER

of pump shoes, two pairs of velvet slippers, a wrist watch, two rings, a brooch, silk sarees, blouse pieces, and so on. I got in touch with a near relative of Ramu’s employed in a bank in Madras. I learnt that his old father was hale and hearty, and there was no mention of cholera. Above all, Ramu was never known to have visited Trichinopoly. His whereabouts were unknown. The letter concluded : ” Someone recently returned from a tour mentioned that he thought he caught a glimpse of Ramu in a large gathering during some music festival in Hyderabad.

He was, however, not very certain about it... .”

I sold my shop and everything, paid off my creditors, and left Malgudi. I was a bankrupt, with a wife and four children to support. We moved from place to place, living on the charity of friends, relatives, and unknown people. Sometimes nobody would feed us and we threw ourselves down in a dark corner of some rest-house, and my ragged children cried till sleep overcame them. I needn’t

weary you with an account of my struggles. It is another story. I must tell you about Ramu. I have to add only this about my own career. Four years later I came across a coffee-estate owner in Mempu Hills, and he gave me a fresh start ; and I must say, thanks to him, I have done very well indeed in the coffee trade.

Now about Ramu. A year ago I was panting up the steps of Thirupathi Hills. I had a vow to fulfil at the temple. I had passed two thousand steps when a familiar voice assailed my ears from among the group of mendicants lining the steps. I stopped and turned. And there he was, I could hardly recognize him now. I had seen him off at Malgudi station ten years before. His face was now dark, scarred and A CAREER 133

pitted. His eyes were fixed in a gaze. I should have passed him without noticing if he hadn't called out for alms. His voice was still unchanged. I stopped and said,

" Look here."

"

I can't see, I am blind."

" Who are you ? Where do you come from ?

"

I

asked in a voice which I tried to disguise with a little gruffness.

"

Go, go your way. Why do you want to know all that ?

" he said.

I had often boasted that if I met him I would break his bones first ; but this was not at all how I had hoped to see him again. I felt very confused and unhappy. I dropped a coin on his upraised palm and passed on. But after moving up a few steps I stopped and beckoned to another beggar sitting by his side. He came up. I

held up an anna coin before him and said,

” You may have this if you will

tell me something about that blind man... .”

“

I know him,” said this beggar, who had no arms.

” We keep together. He has arms, but no eyes ; I have eyes, but no arms, and so we find each other helpful. We move about together. He is not a beggar like me, but a sanyasi. He came here two years ago. He had once much money in Hyderabad, Delhi, Benares or somewhere. Smallpox took away his sight. His wife, a bad sort, deserted him. He is vexed with the world. Some pilgrims coming from the North brought him here... . But, surely you won’t tell him I have spoken all this ? He becomes wild if those days are mentioned... .”

I went back to Ramu, stood before him and watched him for a moment. I felt like shouting.

“

Ramu,

God has punished you enough. Now come with me.

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124 A CAREER

Where is your sweetheart? Where is my money?

What devil seized you ?

” But I checked myself. I

felt that the greatest kindness I could do him was to leave him alone. I silently placed a rupee on his outstretched palm, and raced up the steps. At the bend I turned my head and had another look at him.

And that was the last I saw of him. For when I returned that way four days later, he was not to be seen. Perhaps he had moved on to another place with his armless companion.

17

FATHER’S HELP

LYING in bed, Swami realized with a shudder that it was Monday morning. It looked as though only a moment ago it had been the last period on Friday ; already Monday was there. He hoped that an earthquake would reduce the school building to dust, but that good building Albert Mission School had withstood similar prayers for over a hundred years now. At nine o’clock Swaminathan wailed : “

I have a headache.” His mother said : ” Why

don’t you go to school in ajutka ?

“

” So that I may be completely dead at the other end ? Have you any idea what it means to be jolted in sijutka ?

“

” Have you many important lessons today ?

“

“

Important ! Bah ! That geography teacher has been teaching the same lesson for over a year now.

And we have arithmetic, which means for a whole period we are going to be beaten by the teacher... .

Important lesson !

“

And mother generously suggested that Swami might stay at home.

At nine-thirty, when he ought to have been shouting in the school prayer hall, Swami was lying on the bench in mother’s room. Father asked him : ” Have you no school today ?

“

“

Headache,” Swami replied. ” Nonsense ! Dress up and go.”

126 FATHER'S HELP

” Headache.”

” Loaf about less on Sundays and you will be without a headache on Monday.”

Swami knew how stubborn his father could be, and changed his tactics.

“

I can't go so late to the class.”

“

I agree, but you'll have to ; it is your own fault.

You should have asked me before deciding to stay away.”

” What will the teacher think if I go so late ?

“

“

Tell him you had a headache and so are late.”

” He will beat me if I say so.”

“

Will he ? Let us see. What is his name ?

“

” Samuel.”

” Does he beat the boys ?

“

” He is very violent, especially with boys who go late. Some days ago a boy was made to stay on his knees for a whole period in a corner of the class because he came late, and that after getting six cuts from the cane and having his ears twisted. I wouldn’t like to go late to Samuel’s class.”

“

If he is so violent, why not tell your headmaster about it?”

“

They say that even the headmaster is afraid of him. He is such a violent man.”

And then Swami gave a lurid account of Samuel’s ‘violence ; how when he started caning he would not stop till he saw blood on the boy’s hand, which he made the boy press to his forehead like a vermilion marking. Swami hoped that with this his father would be made to see that he couldn’t go to his class late. But father’s behaviour took an unexpected turn.

He became excited.

” What do these swine mean by

beating our children ? They must be driven out of service. I will see... .”

FATHER’S HELP 127

The result was he proposed to send Swami late to his class as a kind of challenge. He was also going to send a letter with Swami to the headmaster. No amount of protest from Swami was of any avail : Swami had to go to school.

By the time he was ready father had composed a long letter to the headmaster, put it in an envelope, and sealed it.

” What have you written, father ?

” Swaminathan

asked apprehensively.

“

Nothing for you. Give it to your headmaster and go to your class.”

” Have you written anything about our teacher Samuel?;’ “

Plenty of things about him. When your headmaster reads it he will probably dismiss Samuel from the school and hand him over to the police.”

” What has he done, father ?

“

“

Well, there is a full account of everything he has done in the letter. Give it to your headmaster and go to your class. You must bring an acknowledgment from him in the evening.”

Swami went to school, feeling that he was the worst perjurer on earth. His conscience bothered him : he wasn't at all sure if he had been accurate in his description of Samuel. He could not decide how much of what he had said was imagined and how much of it real. He stopped for a moment on the roadside to make up his mind about Samuel : he was not such a bad man after all. Personally he was much more genial than the rest ; often he cracked a joke or two centring around Swami's inactions, and Swami took it as a mark of Samuel's personal regard for him.

But there was no doubt that he treated people badly.

128 FATHER'S HELP

... His cane skinned people's hands. Swami cast his mind about for an instance of this. There was none within his knowledge. Years and years ago he was reputed to have skinned the knuckles of a boy in First Standard and made him smear the blood on his face. No one had seen it actually. But year after year the story persisted among the boys... . Swami's head was dizzy with confusion in regard to Samuel's character whether he was good or bad, whether he deserved the allegations in the letter or not... .

Swami felt an impulse to run home and beg his father to take back the letter. But father was an obstinate man.

As he approached the yellow building he realized that he was perjuring himself and was ruining his teacher. Probably the headmaster would dismiss Samuel and then the police would chain him and put him in jail. For all this disgrace, humiliation, and suffering who would be responsible? Swami shuddered. The more he thought of Samuel, the more he grieved for him the dark face, his small red-streaked eyes, his thin line of moustache, his unshaven cheek and chin, his yellow coat ; everything filled Swami with sorrow. As he felt the bulge of the letter in his pocket, he felt like an executioner.

For a moment he was angry with his father, and wondered why he should not fling into the gutter the letter of a man so unreasonable and stubborn.

As he entered the school gate an idea occurred to him, a sort of solution. He wouldn't deliver the letter to the headmaster immediately, but at the end of the day to that extent he would disobey his father and exercise his independence. There was nothing wrong in it, and father would not know it anyway.

FATHER'S HELP 129

If the letter were given at the end of the day there was a chance that Samuel might do something to justify the letter.

Swami stood at the entrance to his class. Samuel was teaching arithmetic. He looked at Swami for a moment. Swami stood hoping that Samuel would fall on

him and tear his skin off. But Samuel merely asked :

” Are you just coming to the class ?

“

“

Yes, sir.”

” You are half an hour late.”

“

I know it.” Swami hoped that he would be attacked now. He almost prayed :

” God of

Thirupathi, please make Samuel beat me.”

“Why are you late?”

Swami wanted to reply :

“

Just to see what you

can do.” But he merely said :

“

I have a headache,

sir.”

” Then why did you come to the school at all ?

“

A most unexpected question from Samuel.

” My

father said that I shouldn’t miss the class, sir,” said Swami.

This seemed to impress Samuel.

” Your father is

quite right ; a very sensible man. We want more parents like him.”

“

Oh, you poor worm !

” Swami thought.

” You

don’t know what my father has done for you.” He was more puzzled than ever about Samuel’s character.

“All right, go to your seat. Have you still a headache ?

“

11

Slightly, sir.”

Swami went to his seat with a bleeding heart. He had never met a man so good as Samuel. The teacher was inspecting the home lessons, which usually produced (at least, according to Swami’s impression) 130 FATHER’S HELP

scenes of great violence. Notebooks would be flung at faces, boys would be abused, caned, and made to stand up on benches. But today Samuel appeared to have developed more tolerance and gentleness. He pushed away the bad books, just touched people with the cane, never made anyone stand up for more than a few minutes. Swami’s turn came. He almost thanked God for the chance.

“

Swaminathan, where is your homework ?

“

“

I have not done any homework, sir,” he said blandly.

There was a pause.

Why headache ?

“

asked Samuel.

“

Yes, sir.”

“

All right, sit down.” Swami sat down, wondering what had come over Samuel. The period came to an end, and Swami felt desolate. The last period for the day was again taken by Samuel. He came this time to teach them Indian history. The period began at 3.45 and ended at 4.30. Swaminathan had sat through the previous periods thinking acutely. He could not devise any means of provoking Samuel.

When the clock struck four Swami felt desperate.

Half an hour more. Samuel was reading the red text, the portion describing Vasco da Gama’s arrival in India. The boys listened in half languor. Swami suddenly asked at the top of his voice : ” Why did

not Columbus come to India, sir ?

“

” He lost his way.”

“

I can't believe it ; it is unbelievable, sir.”

“Why?” ” Such a great ‘man. Would he have not known the way ?

“

” Don't shout. I can hear you quite well.”

FATHER'S HELP 131

“

I am not shouting, sir ; this is my ordinary voice, which God has given me. How can I help it ?

“

” Shut up and sit down.”

Swaminathan sat down, feeling slightly happy at his success. The teacher threw a puzzled, suspicious glance at him and resumed his lessons.

His next chance occurred when Sankar of the first bench got up and asked :

“

Sir, was Vasco da Gama

the very first person to come to India ?

“

Before the teacher could answer, Swami shouted from the back bench :

“

That's what they say.”

The teacher and all the boys looked at Swami.

The teacher was puzzled by Swami's obtrusive behaviour today.

“

Swaminathan, you are shouting
again.”

“

I am not shouting, sir. How can I help my voice, given by God ?

” The school clock struck a

quarter-hour. A quarter more. Swami felt he must do something drastic in fifteen minutes. Samuel had no doubt scowled at him and snubbed him, but it was hardly adequate. Swami felt that with a little more effort Samuel could be made to deserve dismissal and imprisonment.

The teacher came to the end of a section in the textbook and stopped. He proposed to spend the remaining few minutes putting questions to the boys.

He ordered the whole class to put away books, and asked someone in the second row : ” What is the

date of Vasco da Gama's arrival in India ?

“

Swaminathan shot up and screeched : “

Sixtcentforty—

eight, December twentieth.”

” You needn't shout,” said the teacher. He asked : ” Has your headache made you mad ?

“

“

I have no headache now, sir,” replied the thunderer i3 FATHER’S HELP
brightly.

“

Sit down, you idiot.” Swami thrilled at being called an idiot.

“

If you get up again I will

cane you/’ said the teacher. Swami sat down, feeling happy at the promise. The teacher then asked : “

I

am going to put a few questions on the Mughal period.

Among the Mughal emperors, whom would you call the greatest, whom the strongest, and whom the most religious emperor ?

“

Swami got up. As soon as he was seen, the teacher said emphatically :

“

Sit down.”

“

I want to answer, sir.”

“

Sit down.”

“

No, sir ; I want to answer.”

” What did I say I’d do if you got up again ?

“

” You said you would cane me and peel the skin off my knuckles and make me press it on my forehead.”

“

All right ; come here.”

Swaminathan left his seat joyfully and hopped on the platform. The teacher took out his cane from the drawer and shouted angrily :

“

Open your hand,

you little devil.” He whacked three wholesome cuts on each palm. Swami received them without blenching. After half a dozen the teacher asked : “

Will these do, or do you want some more ?

“

Swami merely held out his hand again, and received two more ; and the bell rang. Swami jumped down from the platform with a light heart, though his hands were smarting. He picked up his books, took out the letter lying in his pocket, and ran to the headmaster’s room. He found the room locked. He asked the peon :

” Where is the headmaster ?

“

” Why do you want him ?

“

” My father has sent a letter for him.”

FATHER'S HELP 133

” He has taken the afternoon off, and won’t come for a week. You can give the letter to the assistant headmaster. He will be here now.”

” Who is he ?

“

” Your teacher, Samuel. He will be here in a second.”

Swaminathan fled from the place. As soon as Swami went home with the letter, father remarked : “

I knew you wouldn’t deliver it, you coward.”

“

I swear our headmaster is on leave,” Swaminathan began.

Father replied :

” Don’t lie in addition to being

a coward... .”

Swami held up the envelope and said : “

I will

give this to the headmaster as soon as he is back... .”

Father snatched it from his hand, tore it up, and thrust it into the wastepaper basket under his table. He muttered :

” Don’t come to me for help even if Samuel throttles you. You deserve your Samuel... .”

18

THE SNAKE^SONG

WE were coming out of the music hall quite pleased with the concert. We thought it a very fine performance. We thought so till we noticed the Talkative Man in our midst. He looked as though he had been in a torture chamber. We looked at him sourly and remarked :

” We suppose you are

one of those great men who believe that South Indian music died one hundred years ago. Or were you at any time hobnobbing with all our ancient musicians and composers, the only reason many persons like you have for thinking that all modern singing is childish and inane ? Or are you one of those restless theorists who can never hear a song without splitting it into atoms ?

“

” None of these,” answered the Talkative Man.

“

I am just a simple creature who knows what he is talking about. I know something of music, perhaps just a little more than anyone else here, and that is why I am horrified to see the level to which taste has sunk... .”

We tried to snub him by receiving his remarks in cold silence and talking among ourselves. But he followed us all the way chatting, and we had to listen to him.

Seeing me now (said the Talkative Man) perhaps you think I am capable of doing nothing more artistic than selling chemical fertilizers to peasants. But I
THE SNAKE SONG 135

tell you I was at one time ambitious of becoming a musician. I came near being one. It was years and years ago. I was living at the time in Kumbum, a small village eighty miles from Malgudi. A master musician lived there. When he played on the flute, it was said, the cattle of the village followed him about. He was perhaps the greatest artist of the century, but quite content to live in obscurity, hardly known to anyone outside the village, giving concerts only in the village temple, and absolutely satisfied with the small income he derived from his ancestral lands. I washed his clothes, swept his house, ran errands for him, wrote his accounts, and when he felt like it he taught me music. His personality and presence had a value all their own, so that even if he taught only

for an hour it was worth a year's tuition under anyone else. The very atmosphere around him educated one.

After three years of chipping and planing my master felt that my music was after all taking some shape.

He said,

" In another year, perhaps, you may go to the town and play before a public, that is, if you care for such things." You may be sure I cared. Not for me the greatness of obscurity. I wanted wealth and renown. I dreamt of going to Madras and attending the music festival next year, and then all the districts would ring with my name. I looked on my bamboo flute as a sort of magic wand which was going to open out a new world to me.

I lived in a small cottage at the end of the street, It was my habit to sit up and practise far into the night. One night as I was *just losing myself in bhairavi raga*, *there came a knock on the door. I felt irritated at the interruption*

136 THE SNAKE SONG

” Who is there ?

“

I asked.

” A sadhu ; he wants a mouthful of food.”

” At this hour ! Go, go. Don’t come and pester people at all hours.”

” But hunger knows no time.”

” Go away. I have nothing here. I myself live on my master’s charity.”

” But can’t you give a small coin or at least a kind word to a sadhu ? He has seen Kasi, Rameswaram ...”

” Shut up,” I cried, glared at the door, and resumed my bhairavi.

Fifteen minutes later the knocks were repeated. I lost my temper.

” Have you no sense ? Why do you

disturb me ?

“

” You play divinely. Won’t you let me in ? You may not give me food for my stomach but don’t deny me your music.”

I didn’t like anyone to be present when I practised, and this constant interruption was exasperating.

” Don’t stand there and argue. If you don’t go at once, I will open the door and push you out.”

“

Ah, bad words. You needn't push me out. I am going. But remember, this is your last day of music. Tomorrow you may exchange your flute for a handful of dried dates."

I heard his wooden clogs going down the house steps*

I felt relieved and played for about ten minutes. But my mind was troubled. His parting words ... what did he mean by them? I got up, took the lantern from its nail on the wall, and went out. I stood on the last step of my cottage and looked up and down the dark street, holding up the lantern. I turned in.

Vaguely hoping that he might call again, I left the door half open. I hung up the lantern and sat down.

THE SNAKE SONG 137

I looked at the pictures of gods on the wall and prayed to be protected from the threat of the unseen mendicant.

And then I was lost in music once again.

Song after song flowed from that tiny bamboo and transformed my lonely cottage. I was no longer a petty mortal blowing through a piece of bamboo. I was among the gods. The lantern on the wall became a brilliant star illuminating a celestial hall... .

And I came to the snake-song in punnaga varali. I saw the serpent in all its majesty : the very venom in its pouch had a touch of glory : now I saw its divinity as it crowned Shiva's head : Parvathi wore it as a wristlet : Subramanya played with it : and it was Vishnu's couch... . The whole composition imparted to the serpent a quality which inspired awe and reverence.

And now what should I see between the door and me but a black cobra ! It had opened its immense hood and was swaying ecstatically. I stopped my song and rubbed my eyes to see if I was fully awake.

But the moment the song ceased, the cobra turned and threw a glance at me, and moved forward. I have never seen such a black cobra and such a long one in my life. Some saving instinct told me : “

Play

on ! Play on ! Don't stop." I hurriedly took the flute to my lips and continued the song. The snake, which was now less than three yards from me, lifted a quarter of its body, with a gentle flourish reared its head, fixed its round eyes on me, and listened to the music without making the slightest movement. It might have been a carven snake in black stone, so still it was.

And as I played with my eyes fixed on the snake I was so much impressed with its dignity and authority 138 THE SNAKE SONG

that I said to myself,

" Which God would forego the

privilege of wearing this in His hair ? ..." After playing the song thrice over, I commenced a new song.

The cobra sharply turned its head and looked at me as if to say,

" Now what is all this ?

" and let out a

terrible hiss, and made a slight movement. I quickly resumed the snake-song, and it assumed once again its carven posture.

So I played the song again and again. And however great a composition might be, a dozen repetitions of it was bound to prove tiresome. I attempted to change the song once or twice, but I saw the snake stir menacingly. I vainly tried to get up and dash out, but the snake nearly stood up on its tail and promised to finish me. And so I played the same song all night.

My distinguished audience showed no sign of leaving.

By and by I felt exhausted. My head swam, my cheeks ached through continuous blowing, and my chest seemed to be emptied of the last wisp of breath.

I knew I was going to drop dead in a few seconds.

It didn't seem to matter very much if the snake was going to crush me in its coils and fill me with all the venom in its sac. I flung down the flute, got up, and prostrated before it crying,

“

Oh, Naga Raja, you are

a god ; you can kill me if you like, but I can play no more... .

“

When I opened my eyes again the snake was gone.

The lantern on the wall had turned pale in the morning light. My flute lay near the doorway. 9

Next day I narrated my experiences to my master.

He said,

” Don't you know you ought not to play punnaga varali at night? That apart, now you can never be sure you will not get the snake in again if you play. And when he comes he won't spare you unless THE SNAKE SONG 139

you sing his song over again. Are you prepared to do it ?

“

“

No, no, a thousand times no,” I cried. The memory of that song was galling. I had repeated it enough to last me a lifetime.

” If it is so, throw away your flute and forget your music. You can't play with a serpent. It is a plaything of Gods. Throw away your bamboo. It is of no use to you any more. ...” I wept at the thought of this renunciation. My master pitied me and said, “

Perhaps all will be well again if you seek your visitor of that night and beg his forgiveness. Can you find him ?

“

I put away my flute. I have ever since been searching for an unknown, unseen mendicant, in this world. Even today if, by God's grace, I meet him, I will fall at his feet, beg his forgiveness, and take up my flute again.

19

FORTY-FIVE A MONTH

OHANTA could not stay in her class any longer.

^ She had done clay-modelling, music, drill, a bit of alphabets and numbers, and was now cutting coloured paper. She would have to cut till the bell rang and the teacher said,

“

Now, you may all go home,” or

” Put away the scissors and take up your alphabets ” Shanta was impatient to know the time.

She asked her friend sitting next, “

Is it five now ?

“

“

Maybe,” she replied.

” Or is it six ?

“

“

I don't think so,” her friend replied, “

because

night comes at six.”

” Do you think it is five ?

“

” Yes.”

“

Oh, I must go. My father will be back at home now. He has asked me to be ready at five. He is taking me to the cinema this evening. I must go home.” She threw down her scissors and ran up to the teacher.

” Madam, I must go home.”

“

Why, Shanta Bai ?

“

” Because it is five o’clock now.”

” Who told you it was five ?

“

” Kamala.”

“

It is not five now. It is do you see the clock there? Tell me what the time is. I taught you to read the clock the other day.” Shanta stood gazing 140

FORTY-FIVE A MONTH 141

at the clock in the hall, counted the figures laboriously and declared,

“

It is nine o'clock.”

The teacher called the other girls and said, ” Who will tell me the time from that clock ?

“

Several of

them concurred with Shanta and said it was nine o'clock, till the teacher said,

” You are only seeing the

long hand. See the short one, where is it ?

“

” Two and a half.”

” So what is the time ?

“

” Two and a half.”

“

It is two forty-five, understand ? Now you may all go to your seats

” Shanta returned to the

teacher in about ten minutes and asked, “

Is it five,

Madam, because I have to be ready at five ? Otherwise my father will be very angry with me. He asked me to return home early.”

” At what time ?

“

” Now.” The teacher gave her permission to leave, and Shanta picked up her books and dashed out of the class with a cry of joy. She ran home, threw her books on the floor, and shouted,

“

Mother, Mother,”

and Mother came running from the next house where she had gone to chat with her friends.

Mother asked,

” Why are you back so early ?

“

” Has father come home ?

” Shanta asked. She

would not take her coffee or tiffin, but insisted on being dressed first. She opened the trunk and insisted on wearing the thinnest frock and knickers, while her mother wanted to dress her in a long skirt and thick coat for the evening. Shanta picked out a gorgeous ribbon from a cardboard soap box in which she kept pencils, ribbons and chalk bits. There was a heated argument between mother and daughter over the dress, and finally mother had to give in. Shanta
142 FORTY-FIVE A MONTH

put on her favourite pink frock, braided her hair, and flaunted a green ribbon on her pigtail. She powdered her face and pressed a vermilion mark on her forehead. She said,

” Now father will say what

a nice girl I am because I’m ready. Aren’t you also coming, mother ?

“

” Not today.”

Shanta stood at the little gate looking down the street.

Mother said :

” Father will come only after five ; don’t stand in the sun. It is only four o’clock.”

The sun was disappearing behind the house on the opposite row, and Shanta knew that presently it would be dark. She ran in to her mother and asked, ” Why hasn’t father come home yet, mother ?

“

” How can I know ? He is perhaps held up in the office.”

Shanta made a wry face :

“

I don’t like these

people in the office. They are bad people “

She went back to the gate and stood looking out.

Her mother shouted from inside :

” Come in, Shanta.

It is getting dark, don’t stand there.” But Shanta would not go in. She stood at the gate and a wild idea came to her head. Why should she not go to the office and call out father and then go to the cinema? She wondered where his office might be.

She had no notion. She had seen her father take the turn at the end of the street every day. If one went there, one perhaps went automatically to father’s office.

She threw a glance about to see if mother was anywhere and moved down the street.

It was twilight. Everyone going about looked gigantic, walls of houses appeared very high, and cycles and carriages looked as though they would bear FORTY-FIVE A MONTH 143

down on her. She walked on the very edge of the road. Soon the lamps were twinkling : and the passers-by looked like shadows. She had taken two . turns and did not know where she was. She sat down on the edge of the road biting her nails. She wondered how she was to reach home. A servant employed in the next house was passing along, and she picked herself up and stood before him.

“

Oh, what are you doing here all alone ?

” he

asked. She replied,

“

I don't know. I came here.

Will you take me to our house ?

” She followed him

and was soon back in her house.

Venkat Rao, Shanta's father, was about to start for his office that morning when a jutka passed along the street distributing cinema handbills. Shanta dashed to the street and picked up a handbill. She held it up and asked :

“

Father, will y6u take me to the

cinema today ?

” He felt unhappy at the question.

Here was the child growing up without having any of the amenities and the simple pleasures of life. He had hardly taken her twice to the cinema. He had no time for the child. While children of her age in other houses had all the dolls, dresses, and outings that they wanted, this child was growing up all alone and like a barbarian more or less. He felt furious with his office. For forty rupees a month they seemed to have purchased him outright.

He reproached himself for neglecting his wife and child even the wife could have her own circle of friends and so on : she was after all a grown-up, but what about the child ? What a drab, colourless existence was hers ! Every day they kept him at the 144 FORTY-FIVE A MONTH

office till seven or eight in the evening and when he came home the child was asleep. Even on Sundays they wanted him at the office. Why did they think he had no personal life, a life of his own ? They gave him hardly any time to take the child to the park or the pictures. He was going to show them that they weren't to toy with him. Yes, he was prepared even to quarrel with his manager if necessary.

He said with resolve :

“

I will take you to the
cinema this evening. Be ready at five.”

“

Really ! Mother !

” Shanta shouted. Mother
came out of the kitchen.

“

Father is taking me to a cinema in the evening.”

Shanta's mother smiled cynically.

"Don't make

false promises to the child

"Venkat Rao glared

at her.

"Don't talk nonsense. You think you are the only person who keeps promises "

He told Shanta :

"Be ready at five, and I will

come and take you positively. If you are not ready, I will be very angry with you."

He walked to his office full of resolve. He would do his normal work and get out at five. If they started any old tricks of theirs, he was going to tell

the boss :

"Here is my resignation. My child's happiness is more important to me than these horrible papers of yours."

All day the usual stream of papers flowed on to his table and out of it. He scrutinized, signed, and drafted. He was corrected, admonished, and insulted.

He had a break of only five minutes in the afternoon for his coffee.

When the office clock struck five and the other clerks were leaving, he went up to the manager and said :

"May I go, sir ?

"The manager looked up

FORTY-FIVE A MONTH 145

from his paper :

” You !

“

It was unthinkable that

the cash and account section should be closing at five.

” How can you go ?

“

“

I have some urgent, private business, sir,” he said, smothering the lines he had been rehearsing since the morning :

” Herewith my resignation.” He

visualized Shanta standing at the door, dressed, and palpitating with eagerness.

” There shouldn’t be anything more urgent than the office work ; go back to your seat. You know how many hours I work ?

“

asked the manager. The

manager came to the office three hours before the opening time and stayed nearly three hours after closing, even on Sundays. The clerks commented among themselves :

“

His wife must be whipping him

whenever he is seen at home ; that is why the old owl seems so fond of his office.”

” Did you trace the source of that Ten-Eight difference ?

“

asked the manager.

“

I shall have to examine two hundred vouchers.

I thought we might do it tomorrow.”

“

No, no, this won't do. You must rectify it immediately.” Venkat Rao mumbled, “

Yes, sir,”

and slunk back to his seat.

The clock showed five-thirty. Now it meant two hours of excruciating search among vouchers. All the rest of the office had gone. Only he and another clerk in his section were working, and, of course, the manager was there. Venkat Rao was furious. His mind was made up. He wasn't a slave who had sold himself for forty rupees outright. He could make that money easily ; and if he couldn't it would be more honourable to die of starvation.

He took a sheet of paper and wrote : ” Herewith

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my resignation. If you people think you have bought me body and soul for forty rupees, you are mistaken.

I think it would be far better for me and my family to die of starvation than slave for this petty forty rupees on which you have kept me for years and years.

I suppose you have not the slightest notion of giving me an increment. You give yourselves heavy slices frequently, and I don't see why you shouldn't think of us occasionally. In any case it doesn't interest me now, since this is my resignation. If I and my family perish of starvation, may our ghosts come and haunt you all your life

"He folded the letter, put it in an envelope, sealed the flap and addressed it to the manager. He left his seat and stood before the manager. The manager mechanically received the letter and put it on his pad.

"Venkat Rao," said the manager.

"I'm sure

you will be glad to hear this news. Our officer discussed the question of increments today, and I've recommended you for an increment of five rupees.

Orders are not yet passed and so keep this to yourself for the present." Venkat Rao put out his hand, snatched the envelope from the pad and hastily slipped it in his pocket.

"What is that letter?"

"

I have applied for a little casual leave, sir, but I think... ."

"You can't get any leave at least for a fortnight to come."

"

Yes, sir. I realize that. That is why I am withdrawing my application, sir.”

“

Very well. Have you traced that mistake ?

“

” I’m scrutinizing the vouchers, sir. I will find it out within an hour... .”

FORTY-FIVE A MONTH 147

It was nine o’clock when he went home. Shanta had already slept. Her mother said, ” She wouldn’t

even change her frock, thinking that any moment you might be coming and taking her out. She hardly ate any food ; and wouldn’t lie down for fear of crumpling her dress... .”

Venkat Rao’s heart bled when he saw his child sleeping in her pink frock, hair combed, and face powdered, dressed and ready to be taken out.

” Why

should I not take her to the night show ?

” He

shook her gently and called,

“

Shanta, Shanta.”

Shanta kicked her legs and cried, irritated at being disturbed. Mother whispered,

” Don’t wake her,”

and patted her back to sleep.

Venkat Rao watched the child for a moment. “

I

don't know if it is going to be possible for me to take her out at all you see they are giving me an increment " he wailed.

20

DASI THE BRIDEGROOM

HIS name was Dasi. In all the Extension there was none like him an uncouth fellow with a narrow tapering head, bulging eyes, and fat neck ; below the neck he had an immense body, all muscle. God had not endowed him with very fluent speech. He gurgled and lisped like an infant. His age was a mystery. It might be anything between twenty and fifty. He lived in a house in the last street. It was a matter of perpetual speculation how he was related to the master of the house. Some persons said he was a younger brother, and some said he had been a foundling brought up by the gentleman. Whatever it was it was not a matter which could be cleared by Pasi himself for, as I have already said, he could not even say how old he was. If you asked, he said a hundred one day and five on the next. In return for the food and protection he received, he served the family in his own way ; he drew water from the well from dawn till midday, chopped wood, and dug the garden.

Dasi went out in the afternoon. When he stepped out scores of children followed him about shouting and jeering. Hawkers and passers-by stopped to crack a joke at his expense. There was particularly a group in a house nicknamed Mantapam. In the front porch of the house were gathered all day a good 148

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company of old men ; persons who had done useful work in their time but who now found absolutely nothing to do at any part of the day. They were ever on the look out for some excitement or gossip. To them Dasi was a source of great joy. The moment Dasi was sighted they would shout, “

Hey, fellow,

have you fixed up a bride ?

“

This question never

failed to draw Dasi in, for he thought very deeply and earnestly of his marriage. When he came and squatted in their midst on the floor they would say, " The marriage season is closing, you must hurry up, my dear fellow."

"

Yes, yes," Dasi would reply.

"

I am going to the

priest. He has promised to settle it today."

"

Today ?

"

"

Yes, tonight I am going to be married. They said so."

" Who ?

"

" My uncle... ."

" Who is your uncle ?

"

" My elder brother is my uncle. I am in his house and draw water from his well. See how my hand is ... all the skin is gone... ." He would spread out his fingers and show his palms. They would feel his palms and say,

" Hardened like wood ! Poor

fellow ! This won't do, my dear fellow, you must quickly marry and put an end to all this... .”

Dasi's eyes would brighten at this suggestion, and his lips would part in a happy smile showing an enormous front tooth. Everyone would laugh at it, and he, too, would sway and rock with laughter.

And then the question,

” Where is your bride ?

“

” She is there ... in Madras ... in Madras... .”

” What is she like ?

“

i 5o DASI THE BRIDEGROOM

” She has eyes like this,” said Dasi, and drew a large circle in the air with his finger.

” What is the colour of her skin ?

“

“

Very, very white.”

” Has she long hair ?

“

Dasi indicated an immense flow of tresses with his hand.

“

Is she very good looking ?

“

” She is ... yes, yes.”

Dasi hid his face in his hand, looked at the group through a corner of his eye and said shyly, “

Yes, yes,

I also like her.”

” Where have you the money to marry ?

“

“

They have to give me three thousand rupees,”

replied Dasi.

” He means that his wages have accumulated,”

some one explained obligingly.

When he went home he was asked where he had been and he said,

” My marriage.” And then he

went and sat down in the shed on his mat, his only possession in the world. He remained there brooding over his marriage till he was called in to dine, late in the night. He was the last to eat because he consumed an immense quantity of rice, and they thought it a risk to call him in before the others had eaten. After food he carried huge cauldrons of water and washed the kitchen and dining-hall floor. And then he went to his mat and slept till dawn, when he woke up and drew water from the well.

For years out of count this had been going on.

Even his life had a tone and rhythm of its own. He never seemed to long for anything or interfere in anybody's business ; never spoke to others except when

spoken to ; never so much as thought he was being DASI THE BRIDEGROOM
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joked at ; he treated everyone seriously ; when the Extension School children ran behind him jeering he never even showed he was aware of their presence ; he had no doubt the strength of an ox, but he had also the forbearance of Mother Earth ; nothing ever seemed to irritate him... .

The little cottage in the third street which had remained vacant from time immemorial suddenly shed its

” To Let “

notice. Along with the newspaper

and the letters, the train one morning brought a film star from Madras, called Bamini Bai a young person all smiles, silk and powder. She took up her abode in the little cottage.

Very soon the Extension folk knew all about her.

She was going to stay in Malgudi a considerable time training herself under a famous musician of the town.

She had her old mother staying with her. The Extension folk had also a complete knowledge of her movements. She left home early in the morning, returned at midday, slept till three o’clock, went out on a walk along the Trunk Road at five o’clock, and so on.

At the Mantapam they told Dasi one day, “

Dasi,

your wife has arrived.”

” Where ?

“

asked Dasi. He became agitated, and swallowed and struggled to express all the

anxiety and happiness he felt. The company assumed a very serious expression and said,

” Do you know the house

in the next street, the little house... . ?

“

“

Yes, yes.”

” She is there. Have you not seen her ?

“

Dasi hid his face in his hands and went away.

He went to the next street. It was about one o’clock in the afternoon. The film star was not to be seen.

i 5a DASI THE BRIDEGROOM

Dasi stood on the road looking at the house for some time. He returned to the Mantapam. They greeted him vociferously.

” How do you like her ?

“

Dasi

replied,

” My eyes did not see her, the door would not open.”

“

Try to look in through the window. You will see her.”

“

I will see through the window,” said Dasi, and started out again.

“

No, no, stop. It is no good. Listen to me.

Will you do as I say ?

“

“

Yes, yes.”

” You see, she goes out every day at five o’clock.

You will see her if you .go to Trichy Road and wait.”

Dasi’s head was bowed in shyness. They goaded him on, and he went along to the Trunk Road and waited. He sat under a tree on the roadside. It was not even two o’clock, and he had to wait till nearly six. The sun beat down fully on his face. He sat leaning against a tree trunk and brooded. A few cars passed raising dust, bullock carts with jingling bells, and villagers were moving about the highway; but Dasi saw nothing and noticed nothing. He sat looking down the road. And after all she came along.

Dasi’s throat went dry at the sight of her. His temples throbbed, and sweat stood out on his brow.

He had never seen anything like her in all his life.

The vision of beauty and youth dazzled him. He was confused and bewildered. He sprang on to his feet and ran home at full speed. He lay down on his mat in the shed. He was so much absorbed in his thoughts that he wouldn’t get up when they called him in to dinner. His master walked to the shed DASI THE BRIDEGROOM 153

and shook him up.

” What is the matter with you ?

“

he asked.

” My marriage... . She is there. She is all right.” “

Well, well. Go and eat and do your work, you fool,” said his master.

Next afternoon Dasi was again at the Trunk Road.

This became his daily habit. Every day his courage increased. At last came a day when he could stare at her. His face relaxed and his lips parted in a smile when she passed him, but that young lady had other thoughts to occupy her mind and did not notice him.

He waited till she returned that way and tried to smile at her again, though it was nearly dark and she was looking away. He followed her, his face lit up with joy. She opened the gate of her cottage and walked in. He hesitated a moment, and followed her in. He stood under the electric lamp in the hall.

The mother came out of the kitchen and asked Dasi, ” Who are you ?

“

Dasi looked at her and smiled ; at that the old lady was frightened. She cried,

“

Bama, who is this man

in the hall ?

” Bamini Bai came out of her room.

” Who are you ?

“

she asked. Dasi melted at the

sight of her. Even the little expression he was capable of left him. He blinked and gulped and looked suffocated. His eyes blazed forth love. His lips struggled to smile. With great difficulty he said, " Wife ... wife, you are the wife... ."

" What are you saying ?

"

" You are my wife," he repeated, and moved nearer.

She recoiled with horror, and struck him in the face.

And then she and her mother set up such a cry that all the neighbours and passers-by rushed in. Somebody i 54 DASI THE BRIDEGROOM

brought in a police Sub-Inspector. Dasi was marched off to the police station. The members of the Mantapam used their influence and had him released late in the night. He went home and lay on his mat.

His body had received numerous blows from all sorts of people in the evening ; but he hardly felt or remembered any of them. But his soul revolted against the memory of the slap he had received in the face... . When they called him in to eat, he refused to get up. His master went to him and commanded, " Go and eat, Dasi. You are bringing me disgrace, you fool. Don't go out of the house hereafter."

Dasi refused to get up. He rolled himself in the mat and said,

"

Go, I don't eat." He turned and faced the wall.

On the following day Dasi had the misfortune to step out of his house just when the children of the Elementary School were streaming out at midday interval. They had heard all about the incident of the previous evening. They now surrounded him and cried,

"

Hey, bridegroom." He turned and looked at them ; there were tears in his eyes.

He made a gesture of despair and appealed to them : “

Go, go,

don't trouble me... . Go.”

“

Oh, the bridegroom is still crying ; his wife beat him yesterday,” said a boy. On hearing this Dasi let out a roar, lifted the boy by his collar and hurled him into the crowd. He swung his arms about and knocked down people who tried to get near him.

He rushed into the school and broke chairs and tables.

He knocked down four teachers who tried to restrain him. He rushed out of the school and assaulted everyone he met. He crashed into the shops and threw things about. He leapt about like a panther DASI THE BRIDEGROOM 155

from place to place ; he passed through the streets of the Extension like a tornado... .

Gates were hurriedly shut and bolted. A group of persons tried to run behind Dasi, while a majority preferred to take cover. Soon the police were on the scene, and Dasi was finally overpowered.

He was kept that night in a police lock-up, and sent to the Mental Hospital next day. He was not very easy to manage at first. He was kept in a cell for some weeks. He begged the doctor one day to allow him to stand at the main gate and look down the road.

The doctor promised this as a reward for good behaviour. Dasi valued the reward so much that he did everything everyone suggested for a whole week.

He was then sent (with a warder) to the main gate where he stood for a whole hour looking down the road for the coming of his bride.

THE Talkative Man said :

It was some years ago that this happened. I don't know if you can make anything of it. If you do, I shall be glad to hear what you have to say ; but personally I don't understand it at all. It has always mystified me. Perhaps the driver was drunk ; perhaps he wasn't.

I had engaged a taxi for going to Kumbum, which as you may already know, is fifty miles from Malgudi.

I went there one morning and it was past nine in the evening when I finished my business and started back for the town. Doss, the driver, was a young fellow of about twentyfive. He had often brought his car for me and I liked him. He was a well-behaved, obedient fellow, with a capacity to sit down and wait at the wheel, which is really a rare quality in a taxi driver.

He drove the car smoothly, seldom swore at passers-by, and exhibited perfect judgment, good sense, and sobriety ; and so I preferred him to any other driver whenever I had to go out on business.

It was about eleven when we passed the village Koopal, which is on the way down. It was the dark half of the month and the surrounding country was swallowed up in the night. The village street was deserted. Everyone had gone to sleep ; hardly any light was to be seen. The stars overhead sparkled
OLD MAN
OF THE TEMPLE 157

brightly. Sitting in the back seat and listening to the continuous noise of the running wheels, I was half lulled into a drowse.

. All of a sudden Doss swerved the car and shouted : " You old fool ! Do you want to kill yourself?

“

I was shaken out of my drowse and asked : " What
is the matter ?

“

Doss stopped the car and said,

“You see that old fellow, sir. He is trying to kill himself. I can’t understand what he is up to.”

I looked in the direction he pointed and asked, ” Which old man ?

” “

There, there. He is coming

towards us again. As soon as I saw him open that temple door and come out I had a feeling, somehow, that I must keep an eye on him.”

I took out my torch, got down, and walked about, but could see no one. There was an old temple on the roadside ; it was utterly in ruins ; most portions of it were mere mounds of old brick ; the walls were awry ; and there was a main doorway with doors shut, and brambles and thickets grew over and covered them. It was difficult to guess with the aid of the torch alone what temple it was and to what period it belonged.

” The doors are shut and sealed and don’t look as if they had been opened for centuries now,” I cried.

“

No, sir,” Doss said coming nearer.

“

I saw the

old man open the doors and come out. He is standing there ; shall we ask him to open them again if you want to go in and see ?

“

I said to Doss,

“

Let us be going. We are wasting
our time here.”

We went back to the car. Doss sat in his seat, pressed the self-starter, and asked
without turning his head,

” Are you permitting this fellow to come with 158 OLD MAN OF THE
TEMPLE

us, sir? He says he will get down at the next milestone.”

“Which fellow? “I asked.

Doss indicated the space on his left.

” What is the matter with you, Doss ? Have you had a drop of drink or
something ?

“

“

I have never tasted any drink in my life, sir,” he said, and added,

” Get down, old boy. Master says

he can’t take you.”

” Are you talking to yourself?

“

“

After all I think we needn’t care for these unknown fellows on the road,” he said.

“

Doss,” I pleaded.

” Do you feel confident you
can drive ? If you feel dizzy don’t venture to start the car.”

” Thank you, sir,” said Doss.

“

I would rather

not start the car now. I am feeling a little out of sorts.” I looked at him anxiously.
He closed his eyes, his breathing became heavy and noisy, and gradually his
head sank.

“

Doss, Doss,” I cried desperately. I got down, walked to the front seat, opened the
door, and shook him vigorously. He opened his eyes, assumed a hunched-up
position, and rubbed his eyes with his hands, which trembled like an old man’s.

” Do you feel better ?

“

I asked.

“

Better ! Better ! Hi ! Hi !

” he said in a thin,

piping voice.

” What has happened to your voice ? You sound like someone else,” I said.

“

Nothing. My voice is as good as it was. When a man is eighty he is bound to feel
a few changes coming on.”

” You aren’t eighty, surely,” I said.

OLD MAN OF THE TEMPLE 159

” Not a day less,” he said.

“

Is nobody going to

move this vehicle ? If not there is no sense in sitting here all day. I will get down and go back to my temple.”

“

I don’t know driving,” I said.

” And unless you

care to do it I don’t see how the vehicle can move.”

” Me !

“

exclaimed Doss.

” These new carriages !

God knows what they are drawn by, I never understand, though I could handle a pair of bullocks quite well in my time. May I ask a question ?

“

” Go on,” I said.

” Where is everybody ?

“

” Who ?

“

“

Lots of people I knew are not to be seen at all.

All sorts of new fellows everywhere, and nobody seems to care. Not a soul comes near the temple. All sorts of people go about but not one who cares to stop and talk to me. Why doesn't the king ever come this way ? He used to go this way at least once a year before.”

” Which king ?

“

I asked.

” Let me go, you idiot,” said Doss, edging towards the door on which I was leaning.

” You don't seem

to know anything.” He pushed me aside, and got down from the car. He stopped as if he had a big hump on his back, and hobbled along towards the temple. I followed him, hardly knowing what to do.

He turned and snarled at me :

” Go away, leave me

alone. I have had enough of you.”

” What has come over you, Doss ?

“

I asked.

” Who is Doss, anyway ? Doss, Doss, Doss. What an absurd name ! Gall me by my name or leave me alone. Don't follow me calling

Doss, Doss.'

“

” What is your name ?

“

I asked.

160 OLD MAN OF THE TEMPLE

” Krishna Battar ; and if you go and mention my name people will know who it is for a hundred miles around. I built a temple where there was only a cactus field before I dug the earth, made every brick with my own hands and put them one upon another, all single-handed. And on the day the temple held up its tower over the surrounding country, what a crowd gathered ! The king sent his chief minister... .”

” Who was the king ?

“

” Where do you come from ?

” he asked.

“

I belong to these parts certainly, but as far as I know there has been only a Collector at the head of the district. I have never heard of any king.”

” Hi ! Hi ! Hi !

” he cackled, and his voice rang
through the gloomy silent village.

“

Fancy never

knowing the king ! He will behead you if he hears it.”

” What is his name ?

“

I asked.

This tickled him so much that he sat down on the ground, unable to stand (literally) the joke any more.

He laughed and coughed uncontrollably.

“

I am unhappy to admit,” I said,

“

that my parents

have brought me up in such utter ignorance of worldly affairs that I don't know even my king. But won't you enlighten me ? What is his name ?

“

“Vishnu Varma, the Emperor of emperors... .”

I cast my mind up and down the range of my historical knowledge but there was no one of that name. Perhaps a local chief of pre-British days, I thought.

” What a king ! He often visited my temple or sent his minister for the Annual Festival of the temple.

But now nobody cares.”

“

People are becoming less godly nowadays,” I said.

There was silence for a moment. An idea occurred
OLD MAN OF THE
TEMPLE 161

to me, I can't say why. “Listen to me,” I said.

” You ought not to be here any more.”

” What do you mean ?

” he asked, drawing himself

up proudly.

” Don’t feel hurt ; I say you shouldn’t be here any more because you are dead.”

” Dead ! Dead !

” he said.

” Don’t talk nonsense.

How can I be dead when you see me before you now ?

If I am dead how can I be saying this and that ?

“

“

I don’t know all that,” I said. I argued and pointed out that according to his own story he was more than three hundred years old, and didn’t he know that man’s longevity was only a hundred ? He constantly interrupted me, but considered deeply what I said.

He said :

“

It is like this. ... I was coming through the jungle one night after visiting my sister in the next village. I had on me some money and gold ornaments. Some robbers set upon me. I gave them as good a fight as any man could, but they were too many for me. They beat me down and knifed me ; they took away all that I had on me and left thinking they had killed me. But soon I was up and tried to follow them. They were gone. And I returned to the temple and have been here since... .”

I told him,

” Krishna Batta, you are dead, absolutely dead. You must try and go away from here.”

” What is to happen to the temple ?

” he asked.

“

Others will look after it.”

” Where am I to go ? Where am I to go ?

“

” Have you no one who cares for you ?

“

I asked.

” None except my wife. I loved her very much.”

” You can go to her.”

“

Oh, no. She died four years ago... .”

162 OLD MAN OF THE TEMPLE

Four years ! It was very puzzling.

” Do you say

four years back from now ?

“

I asked.

“

Yes, four years ago from now.‘5 He was clearly without any sense of time. So I asked, ” Was she

alive when you were attacked by thieves ?

“

“

Certainly not. If she had been alive she would never have allowed me to go through the jungle after nightfall. She took very good care of me.”

“

See here,” I said.

“

It is imperative you should

go away from here. If she comes and calls you, will you go ?

“

” How can she when I tell you that she is dead ?

“

I thought for a moment. Presently I found myself saying,

” Think of her, and only of her, for a while and see what happens. What was her name ?

“

“

Seetha, a wonderful girl... .”

” Come on, think of her.” He remained in deep thought for a while. He suddenly screamed, “

Seetha

is coming ! Am I dreaming or what ? I will go with her... .” He stood up, very erect ; he appeared to have lost all the humps and twists he had on his body. He drew himself up, made a dash forward, and fell down in a heap.

Doss lay on the rough ground. The only sign of life in him was his faint breathing. I shook him and called him. He would not open his eyes. I walked across and knocked on the door of the first cottage.

I banged on the door violently.

Someone moaned inside,

“

Ah, it is come !

“

Someone else whispered,

” You just cover your ears

and sleep. It will knock for a while and go away.”

I banged on the door and shouted who I was and where I came from. I sounded the horn of the car in the street. The door was opened, and a whole OLD MAN OF THE TEMPLE 163

family crowded out with lamps.

” We thought it

was the usual knocking and we wouldn’t have opened if you hadn’t spoken.”

” When was this knocking first heard ?

“

I asked.

” We can’t say,” an old man replied.

” The first

time I heard it was when my grandfather was living ; he used to say he had even seen it once or twice. It doesn’t harm anyone, as far as I know. The only thing it does is to bother the bullock carts passing the temple and to knock on the doors at night... .”

I said as a venture,

“

It is unlikely you will be

troubled any more.”

It proved correct. When I passed that way again months later I was told that the bullocks passing the temple after dusk never shied now and no knocking on doors was heard at nights. So I felt that the old fellow had really gone away with his good wife.

LITTLE

over a year ago Rama Rao went out of work when a gramophone company, of which he was the Malgudi agent, went out of existence. He had put into that agency the little money he had inherited, as security. For five years his business brought him enough money, just enough, to help him keep his wife and children in good comfort. He built a small bungalow in the Extension and was thinking of buying an old Baby car for his use.

And one day, it was a bolt from the blue, the crash came. A series of circumstances in the world of trade, commerce, banking and politics was responsible for it. The gramophone company, which had its factory somewhere in Northern India, automatically collapsed when a bank in Lahore crashed, which was itself the result of a Bombay financier's death. The financier was driving downhill when his car flew off sideways and came to rest three hundred feet below the road. It was thought that he had committed suicide because the previous night his wife eloped with his cashier.

Rama Rao suddenly found himself in the streets.

At first he could hardly understand the full significance of this collapse. There was a little money in the bank and he had some stock on hand. But the stock moved out slowly ; the prices were going down, and 164

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he could hardly realize a few hundred rupees. When he applied for the refund of his security, there was hardly anyone at the other end to receive his application.

The money in the bank was fast melting. Rama Rao's wife now tried some measures of economy.

She sent away the cook and the servant ; withdrew the children from a fashionable nursery school and sent them to a free primary school. And then they let out their bungalow and moved to a very small house behind the Market.

Rama Rao sent out a dozen applications a day, and wore his feet out looking for employment. For a man approaching forty, looking for employment does not come very easily, especially when he has just lost an independent, lucrative business. Rama Rao was very businesslike in stating his request. He sent his card

in and asked,

“

I wonder, sir, if you

could do something for me. My business is all gone through no fault of my own. I shall be very grateful if you can give me something to do in your office... .”

” What a pity, Rama Rao ! I am awfully sorry, there is nothing at present. If there is an opportunity I will certainly remember you.*’

It was the same story everywhere. He returned home in the evening ; his heart sank as he turned into his street behind the Market. His wife would invariably be standing at the door with the children behind her, looking down the street. What anxious, eager faces they had ! So much of trembling, hesitating hope in their faces. They seemed always to hope that he would come back home with some magic fulfilment. As he remembered the futile way in which he searched for a job, and the finality with 166 OUT OF BUSINESS

which people dismissed him, he wished that his wife and children had less trust in him. His wife looked at his face, understood, and turned in without uttering a word ; the children took the cue and filed in silently.

Rama Rao tried to improve matters with a forced heartiness.

“

Well, well. How are we all today ?

“

To which he received mumbling, feeble responses from his wife and children. It rent his heart to see them in this condition. There at the Extension how this girl would sparkle with flowers and a bright dress ; she had friendly neighbours, a women’s club, and everything to keep her happy there. But now she hardly had the heart or the need to change in the evenings, for she spent all her time cooped up in the kitchen.

And then the children. The house in the Extension had a compound and they

romped about with a dozen other children : it was possible to have numerous friends in the fashionable nursery school. But here the children had no friends, and could play only in the backyard of the house. Their shirts were beginning to show tears and frays. Formerly they were given new clothes once in three months. Rama Rao lay in bed and spent sleepless nights over it.

All the cash in hand was now gone. Their only source of income was the small rent they were getting for their house in the Extension. They shuddered to think what would happen to them if their tenant should suddenly leave.

It was in this condition that Rama Rao came across a journal in the Jubilee Reading Room. It was called The Captain. It consisted of four pages and all of them were devoted to crossword puzzles. It offered every week a first prize of four thousand rupees*

For the next few days his head was free from family OUT OF BUSINESS 167

cares. He was intensely thinking of his answers : whether it should be TALLOW or FOLLOW. Whether BAD or MAD or SAD would be most apt for a clue which said

” Men who are this had better be avoided.”

He hardly stopped to look at his wife and children standing in the doorway, when he returned home in the evenings. Week after week he invested a little money and sent down his solutions, and every week he awaited the results with a palpitating heart. On the day a solution was due he hung about the newsagent's shop, worming himself into his favour in order to have a look into the latest issue of The Captain without paying for it. He was too impatient to wait till the journal came on the table in the Jubilee Reading Room. Sometimes the newsagent would grumble, and Rama Rao would pacify him with an awkward, affected optimism.

“

Please wait. When I get a

prize I will give you three years' subscription in advance. ...” His heart quailed as he opened the page announcing the prize-winners. Someone in Baluchistan, someone in Dacca, and someone in Ceylon had hit upon the right set of words ; not Rama Rao. It took three hours for Rama Rao to recover from this shock. The

only way to exist seemed to be to plunge into the next week's puzzle ; that would keep him buoyed up with hope for a few days more.

This violent alternating between hope and despair soon wrecked his nerves and balance. At home he hardly spoke to anyone. His head was always bowed in thought. He quarrelled with his wife if she refused to give him his rupee a week for the puzzles. She was of a mild disposition and was incapable of a sustained quarrel, with the result that he always got i68 OUT OF BUSINESS

what he wanted, though it meant a slight sacrifice in household expenses.

One day the good journal announced a special offer of eight thousand rupees. It excited Rama Rao's vision of a future tenfold. He studied the puzzle.

There were only four doubtful corners in it, and he might have to send in at least four entries. A larger outlay was indicated.

" You must give me five

rupees this time," he said to his wife, at which that good lady became speechless. He had become rather insensitive to such things these days, but even he could not help feeling the atrocious nature of his demand. Five rupees were nearly a week's food for the family. He felt disturbed for a moment ; but he had only to turn his attention to speculate whether HOPE or DOPE or ROPE made most sense (for " Some

People Prefer This to Despair "), and his mind was at once at rest.

After sending away the solutions by registered post he built elaborate castles in the air. Even if it was only a share he would get a substantial amount of money. He would send away his tenants, take his wife and children back to the bungalow in the Extension, and leave all the money in his wife's hands for her to manage for a couple of years or so ; he himself would take a hundred and go away to Madras and seek his fortune there. By the time the money in his wife's hands was spent he would have found some profitable work in Madras.

On the fateful day of results Rama Rao opened The Captain, and the correct solution stared him in the face. His blunders were numerous. There was no chance of getting back even a few annas now.

He moped about till the evening. The more he OUT OF BUSINESS 169

brooded over this the more intolerable life seemed... .

All the losses, disappointments and frustrations of his life came down on him with renewed force. In the evening instead of turning homeward he moved along the Railway Station Road. He slipped in at the level crossing and walked down the line a couple of miles. It was dark. Far away the lights of the town twinkled, and the red and green light of a signal post loomed over the surroundings a couple of furlongs behind him. He had come to the conclusion that life was not worth living. If one had the misfortune to be born in the world the best remedy was to end matters on a railway line or with a rope ("Dope ?

Hope?" his mind asked involuntarily). He pulled it back.

"None of that," he said to it and set it rigidly to contemplate the business of dying. Wife, children ... nothing seemed to matter. The only important thing now was total extinction. He lay across the lines. The iron was still warm. The day had been hot. Rama Rao felt very happy as he reflected that in less than ten minutes the train from Trichinopoly would be arriving.

He lay there he did not know how long. He strained his ears to catch the sound of the train, but he heard nothing more than a vague rattling and buzzing far off... . Presently he grew tired of lying down there. He rose and walked back to the station.

There was a good crowd on the platform. He asked someone,

"What has happened to the train ?

"

"A goods train has derailed three stations off, and the way is blocked. They have sent up a relief.

All the trains will be at least three hours late today... ."

"

God, you have shown me mercy !

” Rama Rao

cried and ran home.

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His wife was waiting at the door looking down the street. She brightened up and sighed with relief on seeing Rama Rao. She welcomed him with a warmth he had never known for over a year now. “

Oh, why

are you so late today ?

“

she asked.

“

I was somehow

feeling very restless the whole evening. Even the children were worried. Poor creatures ! They have just gone to sleep.”

When he sat down to eat she said, ” Our tenants in

the Extension bungalow came in the evening to ask if you would sell the house. They are ready to offer good cash for it immediately.” She added quietly,, “

I think we may sell the house.”

“

Excellent idea,” Rama Rao replied jubilantly. “

This minute we can get four and a half thousand for it. Give me the half thousand and I will go away to Madras and see if I can do anything useful there.

You keep the balance with you and run the house.

Let us first move to a better locality. ...”

” Are you going to employ your five hundred to get more money out of crossword puzzles ?

“

she asked

quietly. At this Rama Rao felt depressed for a moment and then swore with great emphasis, “

No,

no. Never again.”

23

OLD BONES

THE Talkative Man said :

I was canvassing agent for a company manufacturing chemical fertilizers, and my work took me into the country for over twenty days in the month.

One night I was held up in a dak bungalow, a mile outside the village Tayur.

If ever there was a deserted dak bungalow it was this. It was over a hundred years old, built in the company days, a massive rounded structure, with a fine circular veranda, hefty pillars, and plaster standing out in flakes ; the whole thing was tucked away in a casuarina grove. I had to spend a night in it, and a little fellow, a nephew of mine, happened to be with me.

The caretaker, a parched old man, who looked like a lost soul, opened the door for me, placed a rusty oil lamp on the table in the hall, pushed up and down some heavy furniture, hovered about till we had had our dinner, and then said that he must go away for the night.

My nephew somehow seemed to dislike the idea : “

Uncle, why should he go ?

“

“

Perhaps he has a home in the village ; whatever it is, why do you want him ?

“

I asked.

He could not explain. He merely mumbled, “

I

thought it might be interesting.” “

I hope you are not afraid

“

“

No, not at all,” said the boy.

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But I could see that he was slightly nervous. He was brought up in Madras, accustomed to crowds and electric lights ; this loneliness in an ancient bungalow with a shadow-throwing rusty lamp gave him a feeling of discomfort. So I tried to persuade the old man :

” Why won’t you sleep here ?

“

“

No, no, I can’t,” wheezed the old man. “

I have

been a caretaker for over forty years now, and I won’t sleep here. You may write a complaint if you like.

I don’t care if I lose this job. Such a riddance it will be for me and they won’t get another even if they offer a thousand sovereigns.” Jingling his key bunch he hobbled away. I made a bed for the boy, drew it close to mine, and asked him to lie down. I shut the front door, opened a window or two, sat down at the table, and opened my portfolio. I had my journal to write and check accounts. I drew the lamp close to my papers, and was soon absorbed in work. The boy snored. Outside the casuarina murmured. For a while noises from the village barking of dogs, snatches of songs and arguments came floating in the air, and then they ceased. Even the boy ceased to snore.

It was past eleven when I finished my work. I put away my papers, blew out the lamp, and lay down.

I am not a very sound sleeper. I usually lie blinking in the dark for a long time. It must have been past midnight. I was just falling asleep when I heard the banging of a window shutter. I got up, turned up the stays of the shutter, and returned to bed. As I was dozing off it banged again.

“

Damn,” I

said. There was not the slightest breeze. Why did these things rattle? I fumbled about in the dark and shut the windows tight. I returned to bed and OLD BONES
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lay awake. Shutters in another part of the building rumbled. It was irritating. I took out my torch to see if the boy had been disturbed. He was fast asleep.

I went over to every corner of the building and hooked up the shutters and doors.

When I lay down again, a new kind of disturbance began. There was a noise as if the front door was being violently kicked and fisted. I started up.

” Who is there ?

“

I bellowed. The noise moved

away, and now another door was kicked and fisted, and then the closed windows. This was a travelling process : someone seemed to be flying round, battering all the doors and shutters. The din was continuous.

“Who is there? Who is there?” I cried, almost running round and round as the noise passed on from place to place. I grew anxious about the boy. What a fright he would get if he woke up !

I picked up the box of matches and struck a stick.

As I took it near the wick of the lamp, it was blown off. I struck another with no better success. I wasted half the box. And then the glass chimney flew off the table and splintered on the floor. I flashed the torchlight on the boy, fervently hoping that he still slept ; but he was sitting up in bed.

“

Raju, lie down, it is nothing,” I began.

” You lie down if you like,” replied the boy. His voice was changed. It was gruff like an adult’s.

There was no banging on the doors now, and so I said to him :

” Some loose shutters rattled, so it has stopped now, you see

“

” Shut up, will you ?

” he said in answer.

” You

are a whole set of selfish brutes ; won’t trouble to know what a man wants “

” What are you saying ?

“

I asked.

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” You know where my bones are ?

“

” Under your skin, I am sure.”

” You will learn not to joke with me,” said the gruff voice. And then the boy left his bed, took me by the neck, and pushed me out. I was nearly ten stone, and that was a young fellow of twelve. How could he handle me in this manner ? I felt indignant and tried to resist. But it was no use. He displayed enormous strength. He wheeled me about, almost tore open the front door, and flung me out. I flew across the veranda and came down on the lawn, bruised and shaken. The door shut behind me.

I sat there I don’t know how long, frightened out of my wits. Presently my sense of responsibility returned. How could I let that youngster shut himself in ? It was my duty to return him intact to his parents. I felt truly sorry for having brought him down with me.

I got up with difficulty, limped up the steps, knocked on the door.

” Go away,” screamed the boy,

“

or I will rip

you up.”

“

Raju, Raju,” I pleaded.

” Won’t you open the

door for your,uncle ?

“

” See here, I am not Raju. So don’t call me Raju hereafter, do you understand ?

“

” Who are you ?

“

” Do you want to know ?

“

“

Certainly.”

“

Ah, I am so happy you are prepared to hear about me ! But what is the use ? You won’t help me.”

“

Oh, I will do anything for you. But tell me who you are.”

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I am Murugesan-

“

Oh, Murugesan, what are you doing here ?

“

” Good man,” said the boy happily, greatly pleased at being called Murugesan.

” What are you doing here ?

“

I persisted. ” Where can I go ? These scoundrels are defiling my bones. I won’t move till that is stopped.”

” Do you want me to do anything ?

“

I asked, my

voice trembling involuntarily : the prospect of picking unknown bones at midnight shook me.

“

Yes,” said the boy.

” Go to the backyard and

dig out the roots of the big tamarind tree. You will find my bones. Take them and throw them into the well, and I promise I will go away and never come again.”

“

If I don’t do it ?

“

“

I will never leave this place, nor open the door.”

“

Murugesan,” I said a few minutes later, “

won’t

you tell me something about your good self?

“

“

I stayed here for a night on my way to Malgudi.

That man suffocated me while I slept and stole my purse. He pressed a pillow on my face and I think he sat on it.”

” Who did it ?

“

” The old man who has the keys of this bungalow.”

“

Isn't he too old to do such a thing ?

“

“

Oh, no. He is very deft with the pillow... .

And then he buried me under the tamarind tree.

Now every pig which noses about for filth stamps over my head all day ; and every donkey and every passer-by defiles my bones, and they heap all kinds of rubbish there. How can I rest ?

“

“

If I throw the bones into the well, will you open the door and quit the building for ever ?

“

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“

I promise,” said the nephew.

I went down, clutching my torch, and searched for something to dig with. I pulled out a couple of bamboo palings from a fence, went to the backyard, and set to work. I am not a coward, but the whole situation shook my nerves. The backyard was a most desolate place, an endless vista of trees and shrubs and a rocky hillock looming over it all. Jackals howled far off, and night insects whirled about and hummed. And this strange task of digging up an unknown grave at night !

I placed the lit torch on the ground and cleared a part of the rubbish dumped under the tree. After throwing up earth for half an hour I picked up a skull and a few leg bones. I felt sick. I could not find more than six or seven pieces. I picked them up.

A few yards off there was the well, weed-covered, with all its masonry crumbling in. I flung the bones into the well, and as they splashed into the water I heard the boy shout from within the house : “

Many

thanks. Good-bye.”

I ran in. The door was open, and the boy lay across the threshold. I carried him to his bed.

Next morning I asked him,

” Did you sleep well ?

“

“

Yes. But I had all sorts of wild dreams.” His voice was soft and boyish. I asked,
” Can you lift me

and throw me out ?

” The boy laughed.

” What a

question, uncle ! How can I ?

“

The old caretaker came up at about six. I was ready to start. I had to walk a couple of miles to the cross-roads and catch an early bus for Malgudi.

I settled accounts with the old man : the broken chimney had to be paid for, and then the rent for the night.

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As I was about to leave I couldn’t resist it. I called the old man aside and asked :
” You know of

a person called Murugesan who spent a night in this bungalow ?

“

The old man’s face turned pale. He replied : “

I

know nothing. Go about your business.”

” My business will be to tell the police what I know.”

” The police !

” He fell down at my feet and

cringed :

“

I know nothing. Please don't ruin an old man.”

I went away and joined my nephew. He asked, ” Why did the old man fall on the ground, uncle ?

“

“

I don't know,” I replied.

Till I reached the bus road I debated within myself whether to tell the police, but ultimately decided against it. I am a busy man, and getting mixed up in a police case is a whole-time job. Some day when I don't have much work I will take it up.

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ATTILA

IN a mood of optimism they named him “

Attila.”

What they wanted of a dog was strength, formidableness, and fight, and hence he was named after the “

Scourge of Europe.”

The puppy was only a couple of months old : he had square jaws, red eyes, pug nose and a massive head, and there was every reason to hope that he would do credit to his name. The immediate reason for buying him was a series of house-breakings and thefts in the neighbourhood, and our householders decided to put more trust in a dog than in the police. They searched far and wide and met a dog fancier. He held up a month-old black-and-white puppy and said, ” Come and fetch him a month hence. In six months he will be something to be feared and respected.” He spread out before them a pedigree sheet which was stunning. The puppy had, running in his veins, the choicest and the most ferocious blood.

They were satisfied, paid an advance, returned a month later, paid down seventy-five rupees, and took the puppy home. The puppy, as I have already indicated, did not have a very prepossessing appearance and was none too playful, but this did not prevent his owners from sitting in a circle around him and admiring him. There was a prolonged debate as to what he should be named. The ” youngest suggested, Why not call him Tiger ?

“

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“

Every other street-mongrel is named Tiger,” came the reply.

” Why not Caesar ?

“

“

Caesar ! If a census were taken of dogs you would find at least fifteen thousand Caesars in South India alone... . Why not Fire ?

“

“

It is fantastic.”

“Why not Thunder?”

“

It is too obvious.”

“

Grip ?

“

“

Still obvious, and childish.”

There was a deadlock. Someone suggested “Attila,”

and a shout of joy went up to the skies. No more satisfying name was thought of for man or animal.

But as time passed our Attila exhibited a love of humanity which was disconcerting sometimes. The Scourge of Europe could he ever have been like this ?

They put it down to his age. What child could help loving all creatures ? In their zeal to establish this fact, they went to the extent of delving into ancient history to find out what ” The Scourge of Europe “

was like when he was a child. It was rumoured that as a child he clung to his friends and to his parents’

friends so fast that often he had to be beaten and separated. But when he was fourteen he showed the first sign of his future : he knocked down and plunged his knife into a fellow who tried to touch his marbles.

Ah, this was encouraging. Let our dog reach the parallel of fourteen years and people would get to know his real nature.

But this was a vain promise. He stood up twenty inches high, had a large frame, and a forbidding appearance on the whole but that was all. A variety of people entered the gates of the house every day : mendicants, bill-collectors, postmen, tradesmen, and i8o ATTILA

family friends. All of them were warmly received by Attila. The moment the gate clicked he became alert and stood up looking towards the gate. By the time anyone entered the gate Attila went blindly charging forward. But that was all. The person had only to stop and smile, and Attila would melt. He would behave as if he apologized for even giving an impression of violence. He would lower his head, curve his body, tuck his tail between his legs, roll his eyes, and moan as

if to say :

” How sad that you should have mistaken my gesture ! I only hurried down to greet you.”

Till he was patted on the head, stroked, and told that he was forgiven, he would be in extreme misery.

Gradually he realized that his bouncing advances caused much unhappy misunderstanding. And so when he heard the gate click he hardly stirred. He merely looked in that direction and wagged his tail.

The people at home did not very much like this attitude. They thought it rather a shame.

” Why not change his name to Blind Worm ?

“

somebody asked.

” He eats like an elephant,” said the mother of the family. “You can employ two watchmen for the price of the rice and meat he consumes. Somebody comes every morning and steals all the flowers in the garden and Attila won’t do anything about it ...”

” He has better business to do than catch flower thieves,” replied the youngest, always the defender of the dog.

” What is the better business ?

“

“

Well, if somebody comes in at dawn and takes away the flowers do you expect Attila to be looking out for him even at that hour ?

“

” Why not ? It’s what a well-fed dog ought to be ATTILA 181

doing instead of sleeping. You ought to be ashamed of your dog.”

” He does not sleep all night, mother. I have often seen him going round the house and watching all night.”

“

Really ! Does he prowl about all night ?

“

” Of course he does,” said the defender.

“

I am quite alarmed to hear it,” said the mother.

“

Please lock him up in a room at night, otherwise he may call in a burglar and show him round. Left alone a burglar might after all be less successful. It wouldn't be so bad if he at least barked. He is the most noiseless dog I have ever seen in my life.”

The young man was extremely irritated at this.

He considered it to be the most uncharitable cynicism, but the dog justified it that very night.

Ranga lived in a hut three miles from the town.

He was a “

gang cooly

“

often employed in roadmending.

Occasionally at nights he enjoyed the thrill and profit of breaking into houses. At one o'clock that night Ranga removed the bars of a window on the eastern side

of the house and slipped in. He edged along the wall, searched all the trunks and almirahs in the house, and made a neat bundle of all the jewellery and other valuables he could pick up.

He was just starting to go out. He had just put one foot out of the gap he had made in the window when he saw Attila standing below, looking up expectantly. Ranga thought his end had come. He expected the dog to bark. But not Attila. He waited for a moment, grew tired of waiting, stood up and put his forepaws on the lap of the burglar. He put back his ears, licked Ranga's hands, and rolled his eyes. Ranga whispered,

“

I hope you aren't going to bark... .”

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” Don't you worry. I am not the sort,” the dog tried to say.

“Just a moment. Let me get down from here,”

said the burglar.

The dog obligingly took away his paws and lowered himself.

” See there,” said Ranga pointing to the backyard, “

there is a cat.” Attila put up his ears at the mention of the cat, and dashed in the direction indicated. One might easily have thought he was going to tear up a cat, but actually he didn't want to miss the pleasure of the company of a cat if there was one.

As soon as the dog left him Ranga made a dash for the gate. Given a second more he would have hopped over it. But the dog turned and saw what was about to happen and in one spring was at the gate. He looked hurt.

“

Is this proper ?

” he seemed to ask.

” Do you want to shake me off?

“

He hung his heavy tail down so loosely and looked so miserable that the burglar stroked his head, at which he revived. The burglar opened the gate and went out, and the dog followed him. Attila’s greatest ambition in life was to wander in the streets freely.

Now things seemed to be shaping out ideally.

Attila liked his new friend so much that he wouldn’t leave him alone even for a moment. He sat before Ranga when he sat down to eat, sat on the edge of his mat when he slept in his hut, waited patiently on the edge of the pond when Ranga went there now and then for a wash, slept on the roadside when Ranga was at work.

This sort of companionship got on Ranga’s nerves.

He implored, “Oh dog. Leave me alone for a ATTILA 183

moment. Won’t you ?

” Unmoved Attila sat before

him with his eyes glued on his friend.

Attila’s disappearance created a sensation in the bungalow.

“

Didn’t I tell you,” the mother said, “

to lock him up ? Now some burglar has gone away with him. What a shame ! We can hardly mention it to anyone.”

” You are mistaken,” replied the defender.

“

It is

just a coincidence. He must have gone off on his own account. If he had been here no thief would have dared to come in... .”

” Whatever it is, I don’t know if we should after all thank the thief for taking away that dog. He may keep the jewels as a reward for taking him away.

Shall we withdraw the police complaint ?

“

This facetiousness ceased a week later, and Attila rose to the ranks of a hero. The eldest son of the house was going towards the market one day. He saw Attila trotting behind someone on the road.

“

Hey,” shouted the young man ; at which Ranga turned and broke into a run. Attila, who always suspected that his new friend was waiting for the slightest chance to throw him, galloped behind Ranga.

“

Hey, Attila !

“

shouted the young man, and he

also started running. Attila wanted to answer the call after making sure of his friend ; and so he turned his head for a second and galloped faster. Ranga desperately doubled his pace. Attila determined to stick to him at any cost. As a result of it he ran so fast that he overtook Ranga and clumsily blocked his way, and Ranga stumbled over him and fell. As he rolled on the ground a piece of jewellery (which he was taking to a receiver of stolen property) flew from his hand. The young man recognized it as 184 ATTILA

belonging to his sister, and sat down on Ranga. A crowd collected and the police appeared on the scene.

Attila was the hero of the day. Even the lady of the house softened towards him. She said, " Whatever

one might say of Attila, one has to admit that he is a very cunning detective. He is too deep for words."

It was as well that Attila had no powers of speech.

Otherwise he would have burst into a lamentation which would have shattered the pedestal under his feet.

25

THE AXE

AN astrologer passing through the village foretold that Velan would live in a three-storied house surrounded by many acres of garden. At this everybody gathered round young Velan and made fun of him. For Koopal did not have a more ragged and God-forsaken family than Velan's. His father had mortgaged every bit of property he had, and worked, with his whole family, on other people's lands in return for a few annas a week. A three-storied house for Velan indeed ! ... But the scoffers would have congratulated the astrologer if they had seen Velan about thirty or forty years later. He became the sole occupant of"

Kumar Baugh

"

that palatial house on

the outskirts of Malgudi town.

When he was eighteen Velan left home. His father slapped his face one day for coming late with the midday meal, and he did that in the presence of others in the field. Velan put down the basket, glared at his father, and left the place. He just walked out of the village and walked on and on till he came to the town. He starved for a couple of days, begged wherever he could, and arrived in Malgudi, where after much knocking about an old man took him on to assist him in laying out a garden.

The garden yet existed only in the mind of the gardener.

What they could see now was acre upon acre of i86 THE AXE

weed-covered land. Velan's main business consisted in destroying all the vegetation he saw. Day after day he sat in the sun and tore up by hand the unwanted plants. And all the jungle gradually disappeared and the land stood as bare as a football field. Three sides of the land were marked off for an extensive garden and on the rest was to be built a house. By the time the mangoes had sprouted they were laying the foundation of the house. About the time the margosa sapling had shot up a couple of yards the walls were also coming up.

The flowers hibiscus, chrysanthemum, jasmine, roses, and cannae in the front park suddenly created a wonderland one early summer. Velan had to race with the bricklayers. He was now the chief gardener, the old man he had come to assist having suddenly fallen ill. Velan was proud of his position and responsibility. He keenly watched the progress of the bricklayers and whispered to the plants as he watered them,

" Now look sharp, young fellows. The building is going up and up every day. If it is ready and we aren't we shall be the laughing-stock of the town."

He heaped manure, aired the roots, trimmed the branches, and watered the plants twice a day, and on the whole gave an impression of hustling Nature ; and Nature seemed to respond. For he did present a good-sized garden to his master and his family when they came to occupy the house.

The house proudly held up a dome. Balconies with intricately carved woodwork hung down from the sides of the house ; smooth, rounded pillars, deep verandas, chequered marble floors, and spacious halls ranged one behind another, gave the house such an imposing appearance that Velan asked himself, " Can

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any mortal live in this? I thought such mansions existed only in Swarga Loka"

When he saw the kitchen and the dining room he said, "

Why, our

whole village could be accommodated in this eating place alone !

" The housebuilder's assistant told him, " We have built bigger houses, things

costing nearly two lakhs. What is this house ? It has hardly cost your master a lakh of rupees. It is just a little more than an ordinary house, that is all... ." After returning to his hut Velan sat a long time trying to grasp the vision, scope and calculations of the builders of the house, but he felt dizzy. He went to the margosa plant, gripped its stem with his fingers and said, "

Is

this all, you scraggy one ? What if you wave your head so high above mine ? I can put my fingers around you and shake you up like this. Grow up, little one, grow up. Grow fat. Have a trunk which two pairs of arms can't hug, and go up and spread.

Be fit to stand beside this palace ; otherwise I will pull you out."

When the margosa tree approximately came up to this vision the house had acquired a mellowness in its appearance. Successive summers and monsoons had robbed the paint on the doors and windows and woodwork of their brightness and the walls of their original colour, and had put in their place tints and shades of their own choice. And though the house had lost its resplendence it had now a more human look. Hundreds of parrots and mynas and unnamed birds lived in the branches of the margosa, and under its shade the master's great-grand-children and the (younger) grandchildren played and quarrelled. The master walked about leaning on a staff. The lady of the house, who had looked such a blooming creature i88 THE AXE

on the inauguration day, was shrunken and grey and spent most her time in an invalid's chair in the veranda, gazing at the garden with dull eyes. Velan himself was much changed. Now he had to depend more and more upon his assistants to keep the garden in shape. He had lost his parents, his wife, and eight children out of fourteen. He had managed to reclaim his ancestral property which was now being looked after by his sons-in-law and sons. He went to the village for Ponged, New Year, and Decpavali, and brought back with him one or the other of his grandchildren of whom he was extremely fond.

Velan was perfectly contented and happy. He demanded nothing more of life. As far as he could see, the people in the big house too seemed to be equally at peace with life. One saw no reason why these good things should not go on and on for ever.

But Death peeped around the corner. From the servant's quarters whispers reached the gardener in his hut that the master was very ill and lay in his room downstairs (the bedroom upstairs so laboriously planned had to be abandoned with advancing age).

Doctors and visitors were constantly coming and going, and Velan had to be more than ever on guard against “

flower-pluckers.” One midnight he was awakened and told that the master was dead.

” What is to

happen to the garden and to me ? The sons are no good,” he thought at once.

And his fears proved to be not entirely groundless.

The sons were no good, really. They stayed for a year more, quarrelled among themselves, and went away to live in another house. A year later some other family came in as tenants. The moment they saw Vdan they said,

” Old gardener ? Don't be up. to

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any tricks. We know the sort you are. We will sack you if you don't behave yourself.” Velan found life intolerable. These people had no regard for a garden.

They walked on flower beds, children climbed the fruit trees and plucked unripe fruits, and they dug pits on the garden paths. Velan had no courage to protest. They ordered him about, sent him on errands, made him wash the cow, and lectured to him on how to grow a garden. He detested the whole business and often thought of throwing up his work and returning to his village. But the idea was unbearable : he couldn't live away from his plants. Fortune however, soon favoured him. The tenants left. The house was locked up for a few years. Occasionally one of the sons of the late owner came round and inspected the garden. Gradually even this ceased.

They left “the keys of the house with Velan.

Occasionally a prospective tenant came down, had the house opened, and went away after remarking that it was in ruins plaster was falling off in flakes, paint on doors and windows remained only in a few small patches, and white ants were eating away all the cupboards and shelves. ... A year later another tenant came, and then another, and then a third. No one remained for more than a few months. And then the house acquired the reputation of being haunted.

Even the owners dropped the practice of coming and seeing the house. Velan was very nearly the master of the house now. The keys were with him. He was also growing old. With the best he could do, grass grew on the paths, weeds and creepers strangled the flowering plants in the front garden. The fruit trees yielded their load punctually. The owners leased out the whole of the fruit garden for three years.

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Velan was too old. His hut was leaky and he had no energy to put up new thatch. So he shifted his residence to the front veranda of the house. It was a deep veranda running on three sides, paved with chequered marble. The old man saw no reason why he should not live there. He had as good a right as the bats and the rats.

When the mood seized him (about once a year) he opened the house and had the floor swept and scrubbed.

But gradually he gave up this practice. He was too old to bother about these things.

Years and years passed without any change. It came to be known as the

” Ghost House,” and people

avoided it. Velan found nothing to grumble in this state of affairs. It suited him excellently. Once a quarter he sent his son to the old family in the town to fetch his wages. There was no reason why this should not have gone on indefinitely. But one day a car sounded its horn angrily at the gate. Velan hobbled up with the keys.

” Have you the keys ? Open the gate,” commanded someone in the car.

” There is a small side-gate,” said Velan meekly.

“

Open the big gate for the car !

“

Velan had to fetch a spade and clear the vegetation which had blocked the entrance. The gates opened on rusty hinges, creaking and groaning.

They threw open all the doors and windows, went through the house keenly examining every portion, and remarked :

” Did you notice the crack on the dome ? The walls too are cracked ... There is no other way. If we pull down the old ramshackle carefully we may still be able to use some of the materials, though I am not at all certain that the

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wooden portions are not hollow inside... . Heaven alone knows what madness is responsible for people building houses like this... .”

They went round the garden and said, ” We have

to clear every bit of this jungle. All this will have to go... .” Some mighty person looked Velan up and down and said,

” You are the gardener I suppose ?

We have not much use for a garden now. All the trees, except half a dozen on the very boundary of the property, will have to go. We can’t afford to waste space. This flower garden ... H’m it is ...

old fashioned and crude, and apart from it the front portion of the site is too valuable to be wasted... .”

A week later one of the sons of his old master came and told Velan,

” You will have to go back to your village, old fellow. The house is sold to a company.

They are not going to have a garden. They are cutting down even the fruit trees : they are offering compensation to the leaseholder ; they are wiping out the garden, and pulling down even the building.

They are going to build small houses by the score without leaving space even for a blade of grass... .”

There was much bustle and activity, much coming and going, and Velan retired to his old hut. When he felt tired he lay down and slept ; at other times he went round the garden and stood gazing at his plants. He was given a fortnight’s notice. Every moment of it seemed to him precious and he would have stayed till the last second with his plants but for the sound of an axe which stirred him out of his afternoon nap two days after he was given notice.

The dull noise of a blade meeting a tough surface reached his ears. He got up and rushed out. He saw four men hacking the massive trunk of the old 192 THE AXE

margosa tree. He let out a scream : “

Stop that !

“

He took his staff and rushed at those who were hacking. They easily avoided the blow he aimed.

” What is the matter ?

“

they asked.

Velan wept :

“

This is my child. I planted it.

I saw it grow. I loved it. Don’t cut it down... .”

” But it is the company’s orders. What can we do ?

We shall be dismissed if we don’t obey, and someone else will do it... .”

Velan stood thinking for a while and said, “

Will

you at least do me this good turn ? Give me a little time. I will bundle up my clothes and go away.

After I am gone do what you like.” They laid down their axes and waited.

Presently Velan came out of his hut with a bundle on his head. He looked at the tree-cutters and said, ” You are very kind to an old man. You are very kind to wait.” He looked at the margosa and wiped his eyes,

“

Brother, don’t start cutting till I am really gone far, far away.”

The tree-cutters squatted on the ground and watched the old man go. Nearly half an hour later his voice came from a distance, half indistinctly, “

Don’t cut

yet. I am still within hearing. Please wait till I am gone farther,”

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ENGINE TROUBLE

THERE came down to our town some years ago (said the Talkative Man) a showman owning an institution called the Gaiety Land. Overnight our Gymkhana Grounds became resplendent with banners and streamers and coloured lamps. From all over the district crowds poured into the show.

Within a week of opening, in gate money alone they collected nearly five hundred rupees a day. Gaiety Land provided us with all sorts of fun and gambling and side-shows. For a couple of annas in each booth we could watch anything from performing parrots to crack motor cyclists looping the loop in the

Dome of Death. In addition to this there were lotteries and shooting galleries where for an anna you always stood a chance of winning a hundred rupees.

There was a particular corner of the show which was in great favour. Here for a ticket costing eight annas you stood a chance of acquiring a variety of articles pincushions, sewing machines, cameras or even a road engine. On one evening they drew a ticket number 1005, and I happened to own the other half of the ticket. Glancing down the list of articles they declared that I became the owner of the road engine ! Don't ask me how a road engine came to be included among the prizes. It is more than I can tell you.

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I looked stunned. People gathered around and gazed at me as if I were some curious animal.

“

Fancy

anyone becoming the owner of a road engine !

” some

persons muttered and giggled.

It was not the sort of prize one could carry home at short notice. I asked the showman if he would help me to transport it. He merely pointed at a notice which decreed that all winners should remove the prizes immediately on drawing and by their own effort. However they had to make an exception in my case. They agreed to keep the engine on the Gymkhana Grounds till the end of their season and then I would have to make my own arrangements to take it out. When I asked the showman if he could find me a driver he just smiled : ” The fellow who

brought it here had to be paid a hundred rupees for the job and five rupees a day. I sent him away and made up my mind that if no one was going to draw it, I would just leave it to its fate. I got it down just as a novelty for the show. God ! What a bother it has proved !

“

” Can’t I sell it to some municipality ?

“

I asked

innocently. He burst into a laugh.

” As a showman

I have enough troubles with municipal people. I would rather keep out of their way... .”

My friends and wellwishers poured in to congratulate me on my latest acquisition. No one knew precisely how much a road engine would fetch; all the same they felt that there was a lot of money in it.

” Even if you sell it as scrap iron you can make a few thousands,” some of my friends declared. Every day I made a trip to the Gymkhana Grounds to have a look at my engine. I grew very fond of it. I loved its shining brass parts. I stood near it and patted it

affectionately, hovered about it, and returned home every day only at the close of the show. I was a poor man. I thought that after all my troubles were coming to an end. How ignorant we are ! How little did I guess that my troubles had just begun.

When the showman took down his booths and packed up, I received a notice from the municipality to attend to my road engine. When I went there next day it looked forlorn with no one about. The ground was littered with torn streamers and paper decorations. The showman had moved on, leaving the engine where it stood. It was perfectly safe anywhere !

I left it alone for a few days, not knowing what to do with it. I received a notice from the municipality ordering that the engine should at once be removed from the ground as otherwise they would charge rent for the occupation of the Gymkhana Grounds. After deep thought I consented to pay the rent, and I paid ten rupees a month for the next three months. Dear sirs, I was a poor man. Even the house which I and my wife occupied cost me only four rupees a month.

And fancy my paying ten rupees a month for the road engine. It cut into my slender budget, and I had to pledge a jewel or two belonging to my wife ! And every day my wife was asking me what I proposed to do with this terrible property of mine and I had no answer to give her. I went up and down the town offering it for sale to all and sundry. Someone suggested that the Secretary of the local Cosmopolitan Club might be interested in it. When I approached him he laughed and asked what he should do with a road engine.

“

I'll dispose of it at a concession for you. You have a tennis court to be rolled every morning/' I began, and even before I saw him smile 196 ENGINE TROUBLE

I knew it was a stupid thing to say. Next someone suggested,

“

See the Municipal Chairman. He may buy it for the municipality.” With great trepidation I went to the municipal office one day. I buttoned up my coat as I entered the Chairman's room and mentioned my business. I was prepared to give away the engine at a great concession. I started a great harangue on municipal duties, the regime of this chairman, and the importance of owning a road roller but before I was done with him I knew there was greater chance of my selling it to some child on the roadside for playing with.

I was making myself a bankrupt maintaining this engine in the Gymkhana Grounds. I really hoped some day there would come my way a lump sum and make amends for all this deficit and suffering. Fresh complications arose when a cattle show came in the offing. It was to be held on the grounds. I was given twenty-four hours for getting the thing out of the ground. The show was opening in a week and the advance party was arriving and insisted upon having the engine out of the way. I became desperate ; there was not a single person for fifty miles around who knew anything about a road engine. I begged and cringed every passing bus driver to help me ; but without use. I even approached the station master to put in a word with the mail engine driver.

But the engine driver pointed out that he had his own locomotive to mind and couldn't think of jumping off at a wayside station for anybody's sake. Meanwhile the municipality was pressing me to clear out. I thought it over. I saw the priest of the local temple and managed to gain his sympathy. He offered me the services of his temple elephant. I also engaged ENGINE TROUBLE 197

fifty coolies to push the engine from behind. You may be sure this drained all my resources. The coolies wanted eight annas per head and the temple elephant cost me seven rupees a day and I had to give it one feed. My plan was to take the engine out of the gymkhana and then down the road to a field half a furlong off. The field was owned by a friend. He would not mind if I kept the engine there

for a couple of months, when I could go to Madras and find a customer for it.

I also took into service one Joseph, a dismissed bus-driver who said that although he knew nothing of road rollers he could nevertheless steer one if it was somehow kept in motion.

It was a fine sight : the temple elephant yoked to the engine by means of stout ropes, with fifty determined men pushing it from behind, and my friend Joseph sitting in the driving seat. A huge crowd stood around and watched in great glee. The engine began to move. It seemed to me the greatest moment in my life. When it came out of the gymkhana and reached the road it began to behave in a strange manner. Instead of going straight down the road it showed a tendency to wobble and move zig-zag. The elephant dragged it one way, Joseph turned the wheel for all he was worth without any idea of where he was going, and fifty men behind it clung to it in every possible manner and pushed it just where they liked. As a result of all this confused dragging the engine ran straight into the opposite compound wall and reduced a good length of it to powder. At this the crowd let out a joyous yell. The elephant, disliking the behaviour of the crowd, trumpeted loudly, strained and snapped its

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ropes and kicked down a further length of the wall.

The fifty men fled in panic, the crowd created a pandemonium. Someone slapped me in the face it was the owner of the compound wall. The police came on the scene and marched me off.

When I was released from the lock-up I found the following consequences awaiting me : (i) Several yards of compound wall to be built by me. (2) Wages of fifty men who ran away. They would not explain how they were entitled to the wages when they had not done their job. (3) Joseph's fee for steering the engine over the wall. (4) Cost of medicine for treating the knee of the temple elephant which had received some injuries while kicking down the wall.

Here again the temple authorities would not listen when I pointed out that I didn't engage an elephant to break a wall. (5) Last, but not the least, the demand to move the engine out of its present station.

Sirs, I was a poor man. I really could not find any means of paying these bills. When I went home my wife asked :

” What is this I hear about you

everywhere ?

“

I took the opportunity to explain my difficulties. She took it as a hint that I was again asking for her jewels, and she lost her temper and cried that she would write to her father to come and take her away.

I was at my wit's end. People smiled at me when they met me in the streets. I was seriously wondering why I should not run away to my village. I decided to encourage my wife to write to her father and arrange for her exit. Not a soul was going to know what my plans were. I was going to put off my creditors and disappear one fine night.

At this point came an unexpected relief in the shape ENGINE TROUBLE 199

of a Swamiji. One fine evening under the distinguished patronage of our Municipal Chairman a show was held in our small town hall. It was a free performance and the hall was packed with people. I sat in the gallery. Spellbound we witnessed the Swamiji's yogic feats. He bit off glass tumblers and ate them with contentment ; he lay on spike boards ; gargled and drank all kinds of acids ; licked white-hot iron rods ; chewed and swallowed sharp nails ; stopped his heart-beat, and buried himself underground. We sat there and watched him in stupefaction. At the end of it all he got up and delivered a speech in which he declared that he was carrying on his master's message to the people in this manner. His performance was the more remarkable because he had nothing to gain by all this extraordinary meal except the satisfaction of serving humanity, and now he said he was coming to the very masterpiece and the last act. He looked at the Municipal Chairman and asked :

” Have you a road engine ? I would like to have it driven over my chest.” The chairman looked abashed and felt ashamed to acknowledge that he had none. The Swamiji insisted,

“

I must have a

road engine.”

The Municipal Chairman tried to put him off by saying,

” There is no driver.” The Swamiji replied, “

Don’t worry about it. My assistant has been trained to handle any kind of road engine.” At this point I stood up in the gallery and shouted, “

Don’t ask

him for an engine. Ask me... .” In a moment I was on the stage and became as important a person as the fire-eater himself. I was pleased with the recognition I now received from all quarters. The Municipal Chairman went into the background.

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In return for lending him the engine he would drive it where I wanted. Though I felt inclined to ask for a money contribution I knew it would be useless to expect it from one who was on a missionary work.

Soon the whole gathering was at the compound wall opposite to the Gymkhana. Swamiji's assistant was an expert in handling engines. In a short while my engine stood steaming up proudly. It was a gratifying sight. The Swamiji called for two pillows, placed one near his head and the other at his feet.

He gave detailed instructions as to how the engine should be run over him. He made a chalk mark on his chest and said,

“

It must go exactly on this ; not

an inch this way or that.” The engine hissed and waited. The crowd watching the show became suddenly unhappy and morose. This seemed to be a terrible thing to be doing. The Swami lay down on the pillows and said,

” When I say Om, drive it on.”

He closed his eyes. The crowd watched tensely. I looked at the whole show in absolute rapture after all, the road engine was going to get on the move.

At this point a police inspector came into the crowd with a brown envelope in his hand. He held up his hand, beckoned to the Swamiji's assistant, and said : “

I am sorry I have to tell you that you can't go on with this. The magistrate has issued an order prohibiting the engine from running over him.” The Swamiji picked himself up. There was a lot of commotion. The Swamiji became indignant.

“

I

have done it in hundreds of places already and nobody questioned me about it. Nobody can stop me from doing what I like it's my master's order to demonstrate the power of the Yoga to the people of this country, and who can question me ?

“

ENGINE TROUBLE 201

” A magistrate can/* said the police inspector, and held up the order.

” What business is it of yours or his to interfere in this manner ?

” “I don't know all

that ; this is his order. He permits you to do everything except swallow potassium cyanide and run this engine over your chest. You are free to do whatever you like outside our jurisdiction.”

“

I am leaving this cursed place this very minute/’

the Swamiji said in great rage, and started to go, followed by his assistant. I gripped his assistant's arm and said,

” You have steamed it up. Why not take it over to that field and then go.” He glared at me, shook off my hand and muttered, ” With my

Guru so unhappy, how dare you ask me to drive ?

“

He went away. I muttered,

” You can't drive it

except over his chest, I suppose ?

“

I made preparations to leave the town in a couple of days, leaving the engine to its fate, with all its commitments. However, Nature came to my rescue in an unexpected manner. You may have heard of the earthquake of that year which destroyed whole towns in Northern India. There was a reverberation of it in our town, too. We were thrown out of our beds that night, and doors and windows rattled.

Next morning I went over to take a last look at my engine before leaving the town. I could hardly believe my eyes. The engine was not there. I looked about and raised a hue and cry. Search parties went round. And the engine was found in a disused well near by, with its back up. I prayed to heaven to save me from fresh complications. But the owner of the house when he came round and saw what had happened, laughed heartily and beamed at me :

” You have done me a service. It was the ENGINE TROUBLE

dirtiest water on earth in that well and the municipality was sending notice to close it, week after week. I was dreading the cost of closing, but your engine fits it like a cork. Just leave it there.”

“

But, but ...”

” There are no buts. I will withdraw all complaints and charges against you, and build that broken wall myself, but only leave the thing there.”

“

That’s hardly enough.” I mentioned a few other expenses that this engine had brought on me. He agreed to pay for all that.

When I again passed that way some months later I peeped over the wall. I found the mouth of the well neatly cemented up. I heaved a sigh of great relief.

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ALL AVOIDABLE TALK

HE was told to avoid all quarrels that day. The stars were out to trouble him, and

even the mildest of his remarks likely to offend and lead to a quarrel. The planets were set against him, and this terrified him beyond description. Many things that were prophesied for him lately were coming true.

He sat in a corner of a big jeweller's shop and added up numbers all day. He left it at the end of a day, and on his way home, dropped in for a moment to exchange titbits with a friend near his house, who affected great knowledge of the stars. Occasionally the friend gave out free prophecies. Many things that he said came true.

" You will have bother about

money matters ... for a fortnight. Even your legitimate dues will not reach your hand in time... ."

Too true. The usual rent he received from his village by money order went all over India before coming to him because of a slight error in the addressing. And then his friend told him :

" Saturn will cause minor

annoyances in the shape of minor ailments at home... ." And the following week everyone, from his old mother down to the four-month-old, went down with cold and fever. He himself felt Kke taking to bed, but his jeweller chief would not let him go. And now his friend had told him on the ptevioti* evening,

"

Now, I see your worst period is

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coming to an end, but avoid all avoidable talk tomorrow the whole of Monday. There is always the danger of your irritating others and finding others irritating.”

The moment he opened his eyes and lay in bed, he told himself :

” Must not talk to anyone today who can see where a word will lead ?

” He pinched the

cheek of the youngest, patted the back of another, found the boy of seven unwilling to start for school : was about to shout at him, but decided not to interfere, a happy godsend for the boy. His wife appealed : ” Why do you allow him to have his own way ?

“

He merely shook his head and went off to the bathroom.

His daughter had locked herself in that meant she would not come out for an hour ; she had once again broken the specific order not to go in to bathe at office time. He tapped the door twice or thrice, glared at it, and went away and put himself under the tap in the front garden. All through his dinner he sat with bowed head, maintaining a determined silence, answering his wife’s questions with a curt ” Yes “

or

” No/* While starting for his office it was his usual practice to stand in the passage and ask for a little betel-nut and leaves, with a cynical remark that they might have consideration for a man who had to catch an early tram... . Today he stood on the threshold waiting to see if anyone would serve him and stepped out into the street, with the reflection : “

If they have

not the sense to do a piece of regular duty without reminder ... I won’t chew

betel, that is all... .”

The tram was crowded as usual. Somebody stood on his toe. He bore it patiently. The tram conductor pushed him aside and uttered rude remarks for standing in the way. He kept quiet. The inspector who ALL AVOIDABLE TALK 205

hopped into the tram for checking would not budge at the rjiagic word “

Pass

“

but insisted on seeing it,

and fretted and swore while Sastri fumbled with his buttons and inner pocket. Sastri never uttered a word, and bore it like a martyr.

At the office he was only two minutes late, but his employer, already seated on his cushion, glared at him and behaved as if he had been two hours late.

Sastri stood before him dumb, listening patiently to all the charges.

” You stand there like a statue,

saying nothing, it must be very convenient, I suppose ...” said his employer, looking him up.

” What has come over you ?

“

nearly escaped Sastri’s

lips, but he checked himself as he came to ” What

has ...”

” Eh ?

” demanded his employer.

” What is ... What is the time now, sir ?

” he

asked.

” You ask me the time ! Go, go to your seat, Sastri, before I am very angry with you... .” Sastri slunk back to his place. The routine of office life started. The attendant wiped and rearranged the showcases : customers started coming in to buy and sell gold trinkets and jewels, the small fan whirred and gyrated, wafting cool air on his chiefs face, the other partner came in at about midday and took his seat. The younger son of the master came in demanding some cash for some extravagance, and went away, and Sastri sat in his corner surrounded by heavy registers. Looking at the figures in the pages, he reflected,

“

Nearly two o'clock ; another eight hours of this place, and the day will be over.” A customer stopped before him, held up a trinket and asked : ” Look here, can this diamond be taken out and reset ad6 ALL AVOIDABLE TAL&

in platinum?” Sastri looked dully at the trinket and said :

” You must ask over there.”

“

It's all right,

I know that,” replied the customer haughtily.

“Answer my question first... .” Sastri shook his head.

“

Evidently you know nothing about these matters.”

“

I know nothing,” Sastri said.

” Then get out of a shop like this,” answered the other, and moved on and sat before the proprietor.

The proprietor presently called,

“

Sastri, come here.”

“

Yes, sir,” Sastri said, without lifting up his head.

There were three more lines to be added to complete the page. If he was interrupted, he would have to start from the top of the gigantic folio all over again.

So there was some delay before he could respond to his master’s call. Before that his master lost his temper and shouted :

“

Drop the pen and come here

when I call, will you ?

” There was still one more

line to go in. If this link was missed, there was the ghastly prospect of having to spend the whole evening in the company of figures. The master’s call became insistent. Sastri looked up for a moment from his ledger ; he caught a glimpse of the other’s face a red patch, flushed with anger. He compressed his Hps and resolved more than ever not to rise without completing the totalling. He sat as if deaf, calmly going through the work. By the time he stood before his master, the latter had gripped in his hand a leaden paperweight.

“

Perhaps he wanted to fling it at me,”

Sastri reflected, and was overwhelmed for a moment with resentment. The

troublesome customer sat there comfortably and watched the scene with a self-satisfied grin. Looking at him Sastri felt it was an added indignity.

” He pays me fifty rupees not for nothing ; ALL AVOIDABLE TALK 207

I slave for him. But what right has he to insult me. , . ?

” He felt desperate. His brow puckered ; he asked, looking at the paperweight in his master’s hand: ” What’s that for ?”

c< Idiot ! What has come over you ? Mind your own business,” said his boss.

” Why can’t you come

up when you are called ?

“

Sastri had meantime

recovered his temper, realizing how near an explosion he had been.

“

I was totalling up, sir,” he said, disciplining himself resolutely.

” Learn to come up

when called. Why were you rude to this gentleman ?

‘ ‘

“

I wasn’t,” replied Sastri briefly. ” Do you think I’m lying ?

“

shouted the customer,

and scowled. Sastri gulped down his reply, just remembering in time the

injunction, ” Avoid all

avoidable talk,” though he felt like hitting his adversary now. His boss looked up at him and said : “

Sastri,

I must warn you for the last time. You must be courteous to all my customers : otherwise you may get out of this shop.”

“

I merely said I didn’t know

about platinum.”

“

I don’t want all that. Everyone in this shop must be able to answer about any department. Otherwise I don’t want him in my service. Do you understand ?

“

Sastri turned back to go. The customer added :

“

I only wanted to know if this could be set in platinum. Can’t he answer that simple question ?

“

“

Oh, is that all ! Even a child should be able to answer that,” echoed his master.

“

Sastri, come here.”

Sastri again stood before him :

” What do you know

of platinum setting ?

“

“

I don’t know anything, sir.”

” You sfcy that to me ! All right, go back to your seat. I wiQ deal with you presently. Get out of my ao8 ALL AVOIDABLE TALK

sight now... .” Sastri sighed and turned back.

While he was going back to his seat, he overheard the customer saying :

” These fellows have become very

arrogant nowadays.”

Sastri, sitting in his corner, tried to drown his thoughts in figures. He partly succeeded, one part of his mind kept smarting :

” Some fool comes in, and

because of him, I must stand every insult ! I’ve served here for twenty years.”

The customer had finished his work and was going past him, throwing at him a triumphant and contemptuous look. Sastri quickly turned away and gazed at the folio.

“

Is this

man born to torment me ? I don’t know who he is !

“

A blue beam of sunlight strayed in through a coloured window pane and moved up to the ceiling : that meant it was nearing dusk. His boss got up and passed out

: as the motor-car started down below, the others in the office also rose to go, and filed past the door, all but Sastri and the watchman. The interruption from his boss had cut in so badly that numbers jumped at each other's throats, and knotted themselves into hopeless tangles ; which meant he would have to go over immense areas of the ledgers ; he switched on the light and worked till nine. Stretching his cramped fingers, he descended the staircase and was on the road.

“

I have been called names. I have

been insulted by strangers and by my officer, before everyone. Platinum ! Platinum ! I've served for twenty years for less than fifty rupees a month... .”

He wondered why he had become so degenerate as not to be able to earn this anywhere else.

“

Tonight

I will not dine without extracting an apology from my boss. Otherwise I shall throw off this work. I don't care what happens... .” He had in a flash ALL
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a vision of his wife and children starving. It seemed insignificant to him now. “

I will somehow manage.

Open a small shop, with a loan or something, and manage somehow. I don't care.” Nothing seemed to him important now except redeeming his dignity as an ordinary human being without any reference to his position as an accountant or the head of a family.

He remembered the lead paperweight : that hurt his mind more than anything else. He walked down the tramline, sunk in thought. A tram for Royapetta stopped near him. He checked his impulse to climb into it and go home. He let it go. He sought out the bus for Kilpauk and got into it.

It was nearly ten when he reached the gates of his master's bungalow.

” Amber Gardens.” The watchman

said :

” So late, Sir !

” “

Yes, I’ve to see the
master,” he replied.

“

Is he awake ?

” “

Yes, he has
just had his dinner and is sitting in the front room... .”

Half way up, Sastri felt uneasy as he recollected the advice of his friend,

” Avoid all avoidable talk... .”

But he could not turn back now. Fate seemed to be holding him by the scruff and propelling him forward.

He stood in the hall. His boss had spread himself on a sofa with a sheet of newspaper before him. Sastri stood hesitating :

” Avoid all ... avoidable... .”

his friend’s words, drumming themselves through his brain.

“

Nothing more avoidable than this... .” he told himself. He wished he could turn back and go away. Better to tackle him in the office It is difficult to talk to a boss in his home.

Before he could make up his mind about it, his boss, turning over a page, observed him standing meekly ; he stared at him for a while and then said : “

Sastri !

H’m. I see now that you have enough sense to fed 2io ALL AVOIDABLE TALK sorry for your own conduct. I was thinking of you.

If I find you again talking back to me I will dismiss you on the spot, remember. And again, I find you are rude to others too. That man comes asking about platinum setting.” “

Yes, sir, platinum setting,” echoed Sastri.

” That was a madman. You saw me with a paperweight in my hand, while he sat before me... .”

“

Yes, sir, I noticed it.”

” But it is none of your concern. Whether mad or sane, whoever it may be, it is your business to answer politely whether it be about platinum, silver, clay, or rag. Everyone in my office should know about every other department. I would have dismissed you for your speech and conduct today. But you have saved yourself now. It is my principle to forgive a fellow who sincerely repents. It is late. You may go now.”

“

I am very grateful to you. Good night, sir,”

Sastri said, putting extreme politeness in his tone.

While going home he did not feel the tediousness of the way or the hour, for he was quietly gloating over the fact that he had triumphed over his stars that day.

28

FRUITION AT FORTY

RAMA Rao obtained his officer's permission to absent himself on the following day.

“

Happy

returns,” exclaimed his officer.

“

Honestly, I did

not think you were forty !

“

Walking down the road to the bus stand, Rama Rao paused for a minute to view himself in a large mirror that blocked the entrance to a hair-cutting establishment.

“

I don't look forty,” he told himself and passed on.

When he left home he had not known that it was the eve of his birthday. It was while drafting an office note that he realized that the 4th of April was ahead. As a rule they never fussed over birthdays at home, but this was a special event : crossing the fortieth milestone seemed to be an extremely significant affair, which deserved to be marked down with feasting and holiday.

At Parry's Corner he struggled into a bus and hung on to a strap.

” Good thing we were monkeys once,”

he reflected.

” Otherwise how could we perform our dinging, and hanging down ; exactly the operations of a monkey, the only difference being that they get on smoothly in a herd while we ” The conductor had tried to push him out, somebody squeezed his sides and scowled at him, and someone was repeatedly trying to stand on his

toes, and the driver was an

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to rattle the passengers to their bones by stopping and starting with fierce jerks. Rama Rao wriggled through and fought his way out when the bus stopped at Central Station. He walked down to Moore Market for a little shopping. Nobody at home knew of his birthday. He would surprise them with gifts ; printed silk pieces, coloured ribbons, building blocks, and sweets. It would be such a novelty, giving gifts instead of receiving. He must also buy vegetables and provisions for a modest feast. It was going to be a quiet family party and if the children were disinclined to go to school he would not force them.

He went round the Moore Market corridor, for a preliminary survey.

“

Shall buy vegetables last,” he

told himself. He went into a cloth shop and demanded to be shown printed silk and selected three or four bits. The bill was made up. As he scrutinized the items his hand went into his pocket to bring out the purse. It was not in its place. He returned the package. He walked out of Moore Market, rambled aimlessly, his mind all in a boil. He sought a park bench and sat down, trying to recollect when he had last taken out his purse.

” Must have brushed against

a pick-pocket in the bus,” he told himself. He felt depressed. He looked about : a mendicant was sleeping on another bench, some children were gleefully destroying a flower bed.

” Some pick-pocket to

deprive me of my fortieth birthday !

” He felt angry

with the perverse fates which messed up and destroyed all one’s plans.

People said forty was a man's best age. Every one attained maturity of mind and body. A man's habits were fixed, his prejudices and favours were solidified once for all : and his human relationships were well FRUITION AT FORTY 213

defined and would be free from shocks and surprises.

Rama Rao dwelt on all these fruitions of forty and was filled with misgivings.

" What have I achieved at

forty ? I have lived sixteen years beyond the point marked by the statistician as the expectation of life for an Indian. I have completed three quarters of the longevity of my elders. What have I achieved ?

"

He brooded over it and answered.

"

I have four

children, the eldest reads in a college. The wife has all the jewellery she had asked for. I have risen to be the head of my section in the office ... yet I live only in a rented house. The marriage of my daughter and the career of my son will have to be tackled by me within five years. Am I good for it ?

" He was

filled with consternation at being forty, at the duties that were definitely expected of him because he was supposed to have reached maturity. He beat his brow at this thought. He wondered if he had really changed.

He cast his mind back. The earliest birthday he could remember was the one when his father had presented him with a glittering lace cap ; then there was his twentieth birthday soon after his B.A., when he resolved he would not be this or that ; it was a catalogue of

"

I won't this or that

“

among them he

could only recollect that he had resolved never to marry and never to take up any employment unless they offered him three hundred rupees for a start, some job which would put him on a swivel chair behind a glass door. And then his thirtieth birthday when he was seized with panic as he realized that he was a father of three. He then believed that things would somehow be clear-cut and settled at forty.

And now here he was. What was it going to be like at fifty or sixty ? Things would remain just the same.

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If one did not worry about oneself one started worrying over children and grandchildren. Things did not change. Rama Rao did not feel that the person who was pleased with the gift of a lace cap was in any way different from the one who felt a thrill when the office communicated an increment. The being who felt the home-tutor's malicious grip now felt the same emotion when the Officer called him up in a bad temper. Deep within he felt the same anxiety and timidity and he wondered how his wife and children could ever look up to him for support at all.

He suddenly felt that he had not been growing and changing. It was an illusion of his appearance caused by a change of curly hair into grey hair, and by the wearing of longer clothes. This realization brought to his mind a profound relief, and destroyed all notions of years ; at the moment a birthday had no more significance and fixity than lines marked in the air with one's fingers. He decided not to mention to anyone at home that it was his birthday.

As he walked back home his mind was still worried about the purse. After all only twenty rupees and an old purse containing receipts, but his wife would positively get distracted if she heard of the loss. Last time when he could not account for five rupees after a shopping expedition she completely broke down.

She must on no account be told of the present loss.

He would keep her mind free and happy that would be the birthday gift for her keeping away from her the theft of the purse just as the purse itself was a gift to an unknown pick-pocket.

He went home late, since he had to walk all the way.

"Held up by unexpected business on the way,"

he explained. Next morning he went \$9 bis pficc fg FRUITION AT FORTY 215 usual.

"Your birthday over ?

“

asked his chief.

“

Yes, sir, over earlier than I expected,” he explained. “

Very good,” said his officer.

“

I was hoping

you would turn up for at least half-a-day, a lot of things to do.”

“

I knew that, sir,” Rama Rao said, going to his desk.

29

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

” T A THAT is sixteen and three multiplied? “Basked y V the teacher. The boy blinked. The teacher persisted, and the boy promptly answered : “

Twentyfour,”

with, as it seemed to the teacher, a wicked smile on his lips. The boy evidently was trying to fool him and was going contrary on purpose. He had corrected this error repeatedly, and now the boy persisted in saying

“

Twentyfour.” How could this

fellow be made to obtain fifty in the class test and go up by double-promotion to the first form, as his parents fondly hoped ? At the mention of “

Twentyfour

“

the teacher felt all his blood rushing to his head. He controlled himself, and asked again : ” How much ?

“

as a last chance. When the boy said the same thing obstinately, he felt as if his finger was releasing the trigger : he reached across the table, and delivered a wholesome slap on the youngster’s cheek. The boy gazed at him for a moment and then burst into tears.

The teacher now regained his normal vision, felt appalled by his own action, and begged frantically : ” Don’t cry, little fellow, you mustn’t... .”

“

I will tell them,” sobbed the boy. “

Oh, no, no, no,” appealed the teacher. He looked about cautiously. Fortunately this nursery was at a little distance from the main ” building.

I’ll tell my mother,” said the boy.

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According to the parents, the boy was^a little angel, all dimples, smiles, and sweetness only wings lacking.

He was their only child, they had abundant affection and ample money. They built up a nursery, bought him expensive toys, fitted up miniature furniture sets, gave him a small pedal motor-car to go about in all over the garden. They filled up his cupboard with all kinds of sweets and biscuits, and left it to his good sense to devour them moderately. They believed a great deal in leaving things that way.

” You must never set up any sort of contrariness or repression in the child’s mind,” declared the parents.

“

You'll damage him for life. It no doubt requires a lot of discipline on our part, but it is worth it,” they declared primly.

” We shall be bringing up a healthy citizen.”

“

Yes, yes,” the teacher agreed outwardly, feeling more and more convinced every day that what the little fellow needed to make him a normal citizen was not cajoling but an anna worth of cane, for which he was prepared to advance the outlay. To the teacher it was a life of utter travail the only relieving feature in the whole business was the thirty rupees they paid him on every first day. It took him in all three hours every evening of which the first half an hour he had to listen to the child-psychology theories of the parents. The father had written a thesis on infantpsychology for his M.A., and the lady had studied a great deal of it for her B.A. They lectured to him every day on their theories, and he got more and more the feeling that they wanted him to deal with the boy as if he were made of thin glass. He had to pretend that he agreed with them, while his own private view was that he was in charge of a little gorilla.

2i8 CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Now the teacher did not know how to quieten the boy, who kept sobbing. He felt desperate. He told the youngster,

” You must not cry for these trifling matters, you must be like a soldier... .”

” A soldier will shoot with a gun if he is hit,” said the boy in reply. The teacher treated it as a joke and laughed artificially. The boy caught the infection and laughed too. This eased the situation somewhat.

” Go and wash your face,” suggested the teacher a fine blue porcelain closet was attached to the nursery.

The boy disobeyed and commanded : “

Close the

lessons today.” The teacher was aghast.

“

No, no,”

he cried.

“

Then, I will go and tell my mother,” threatened the boy. He pushed the chair back and got up.

The teacher rushed up to him and held him down.

” My dear fellow, I’ve to be here for another hour.”

The boy said : “All right, watch me put the engine on its rails.”

“

If your father comes in,” said the teacher.

“

Tell him it is an engine lesson,” said the boy and smiled maliciously. He went over to his cupboard, opened it, and took out his train set, and started assembling the track. He wound the engine and put it down, and it went round and round. ”
You are the Station Master,” proclaimed the boy.

“

No, no,”

cried the teacher.

” You have your tests the day after tomorrow.” The boy merely smiled in a superior way and repeated.

“

Will you be a Station Master

or not ?

” The teacher was annoyed.

“

I won’t be

a Station Master,” he said defiantly, whereupon the young fellow said :

“

Oh, oh, is that what you say ?

“

He gently touched his cheek, and murmured : “

It is

paining me here awfully, I must see my mother.” He CRIME AND
PUNISHMENT 219

made a movement towards the door. The teacher watched him with a dull
desperation. The boy’s cheek was still red. So he said : “

Don’t boy. You

want me to be a Station Master? What shall I have to do ?

“

The boy directed,

” When the train comes to

your station, you must blow the whistle and cry c

Engine Driver, stop the train. There are a lot of people today who have bought

tickets ‘... .’

The teacher hunched up in a corner and obeyed.

He grew tired of the position and the game in thirty minutes, and got up, much to the displeasure of his pupil. Luckily for him the engine also suddenly refused to move. The boy handed it to him, as he went back to his seat and said :

“

Repair it, sir.”

He turned it about in his hand and said : “

I can’t.

I know nothing about it.”

“

It must go,” said the boy firmly. The teacher felt desperate. He was absolutely non-mechanical.

He could not turn the simplest screw if it was to save his life. The boy stamped his foot impatiently and waited like a tyrant. The teacher put it away definitely with :

“

I can’t and I won’t.” The boy

immediately switched on to another demand. “

Tell

me a story... .”

” You haven’t done a sum. It is 8.30.”

“

I don't care for sums," said the boy, "

Tell me

a story."

" No... ."

The boy called,

"

Appa ! Appa !

"

" Why are you shouting like that for your father ?

"

"

I have something to tell him, something important.

..."

The teacher was obliged to begin the story of a 220 CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

bison and a tiger, and then he passed on to All Baba and the Forty Thieves, and Aladin's Lamp. The boy listened rapt, and ordered :

"

I want to hear the

story of the bison again. It is good... ." The teacher was short of breath. He had done during the day six hours of teaching at school.

" Tomorrow.

I've lost all my breath... .”

” Oh ! All right. I'll go and tell... .” exclaimed the boy ; he got up and started running all of a sudden towards the house, and the teacher started after him. The boy was too fast for him, wheeled about madly, and made the teacher run round the garden thrice. The teacher looked beaten. The boy took pity on him and stopped near the rose bush.

But the moment he went up and tried to put his hand on him, the boy darted through and ran off. It was a hopeless pursuit ; the boy enjoyed it immensely, laughing fiendishly. The teacher's face was flushed and he gasped uncomfortably. He felt a darkness swelling up around him. He sank down on the portico step.

At this moment father and mother emerged from the house.

” What is the matter ?

” The teacher

struggled up to his feet awkwardly. He was still panting badly and could not talk. He had already made up his mind that he would confess and take the consequence, rather than stand the blackmail by this boy. It seemed less forbidding to throw himself at the mercy of the ciders. They looked enquiringly at the boy and asked :

” Why have you been running

in the garden at this hour ?

” The boy looked

mischievously at the teacher. The teacher cleared his throat and said :

“

I will explain... .” He was

trying to find the words for his sentence. The father
CRIME AND
PUNISHMENT 221

asked :

” How’s he preparing for his test in arithmetic ... ?

” On hearing the word “

test

“

the boy’s face

fell ; he unobtrusively slunk behind his parents and by look and gestures appealed to the teacher not to betray him. He looked so pathetic and desperate that the teacher replied.

“

Only please let him mug

up the 1 6th table a little more... . He is all right.

He will pull through.” The boy looked relieved.

The teacher saw his grateful face, felt confident that the boy would not give him up .now, and said : “

Good-night, sir ; we finished our lessons early, and I was just playing about with the child ... something to keep up his spirits you know.”

30

UNDER THE BANYAN TREE

r

| TrfE village Somal, nestling away in the forest JL tracts of Mempi, had a population of less than three hundred. It was in every way a village to make the heart of a rural reformer sink. Its tank, a small expanse of water, right in the middle of the village, served for drinking, bathing, and washing the cattle, and it bred malaria, typhoid, and heaven knew what else. The cottages sprawled

anyhow and the lanes twisted and wriggled up and down and strangled each other. The population used the highway as the refuse ground and in the backyard of every house drain water stagnated in green puddles.

Such was the village. It is likely that the people of the village were insensitive : but it is more than likely that they never noticed their surroundings because they lived in a kind of perpetual enchantment. The enchanter was Nambi, the storyteller. He was a man of about sixty or seventy. Or was he eighty or one hundred and eighty ? Who could say ? In a place so much cut off as Somal (the nearest bus-stop was ten miles away) reckoning could hardly be in the familiar measures of time. If anyone asked Nambi what his age was he referred to an ancient famine or an invasion or the building of a bridge and indicated how high he had stood from the ground at the time.

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UNDER THE BANYAN TREE 2*3

He was illiterate, in the sense that the written word was a mystery to him ; but he could make up a story, in his head, at the rate of one a month ; each story took nearly ten days to narrate.

His home was the little temple which was at the very end of the village. No one could say how he had come to regard himself as the owner of the temple.

The temple was a very small structure with red-striped walls, with a stone image of the Goddess, Shakti, in the sanctum. The front portion of the temple was Nambi's home. For aught it mattered any place might be his home ; for he was without possessions.

All that he possessed was a broom with which he swept the temple ; and he had also a couple of dhotis and upper cloth. He spent most part of the day in the shade of the banyan which spread out its branches in front of the temple. When he felt hungry he walked into any house that caught his fancy and joined the family at dinner. When he needed new clothes they were brought to him by the villagers.

He hardly ever had to go out in search of company; for the banyan shade served as a club house for the village folk. All through the day people came seeking Nambi's company and squatted under the tree. If he was in a mood for it he

listened to their talk and entertained them with his own observations and anecdotes. When he was in no mood he looked at the visitors sourly and asked,

” What do you think

I am ? Don’t blame me if you get no story at the next moon. Unless I meditate how can the Goddess give me a story? Do you think stories float in the air ?

“

; and moved out to the edge of the forest and squatted there contemplating the trees.

Oa Friday evenings the village turned up at the 224 UNDER THE BANYAN TREE

temple for worship, when Nambi lit a score of mud lamps and arranged them around the threshold of the sanctuary. He decorated the image with flowers, which grew wildly in the backyard of the temple. He acted as the priest and offered to the Goddess fruits and flowers brought in by the villagers.

On the nights he had a story to tell he lit a small lamp and placed it in a niche in the trunk of the banyan tree. Villagers as they returned home in the evenings saw this, went home, and said to their wives, “

Now, now, hurry up with the dinner, the story-teller is calling us.” As the moon crept up behind the hillock, men, women and children, gathered under the banyan tree. The story-teller would not appear yet.

He would be sitting in the sanctum, before the Goddess, with his eyes shut, in deep meditation. He sat thus as long as he liked and when he came out, with his forehead ablaze with ash and vermilion, he took his seat on a stone platform in front of the temple.

He opened the story with a question. Jerking his finger towards a vague, far-away destination, he asked, ” A thousand years ago, a stone’s throw in that direction, what do you think there was ? It was not the weed-covered waste it is now,% for donkeys to roll in. It was not the ash-pit it is now. It was the capital of the king. , . .” The king would be Dasaratha, Vikramaditya, Asoka, or anyone that came into the old man’s head ; the capital was called Kapila, Kridapura, or

anything. Opening thus the old man went on without a pause for three hours.

By then brick by brick the palace of the king was raised. The old man described the dazzling durbar hall where sat a hundred vassal kings, ministers, and subjects ; in another part of the palace all the musicians
UNDER THE BANYAN TREE
225

in the world assembled and sang ; and most of the songs were sung over again by Nambi to his audience ; and he described in detail the pictures and trophies that hung on the walls of the palace... .

It was story-building on an epic scale. The first day barely conveyed the setting of the tale, and Nambi's audience as yet had no idea who were all coming into the story. As the moon slipped behind the trees of Mempi Forest Nambi said, " Now friends,

Mother says this will do for the day." He abruptly rose, went in, lay down, and fell asleep long before the babble of the crowd ceased.

The light in the niche would again be seen two or three days later, and again and again throughout the bright half of the month. Kings and heroes, villains and fairy-like women, gods in human form, saints and assassins, jostled each other in that world which was created under the banyan tree. Nambi's voice rose and fell in an exquisite rhythm, and the moonlight and the hour completed the magic. The villagers laughed with Nambi, they wept with him, they adored the heroes, cursed the villains, groaned when the conspirator had his initial success, and they sent up to the gods a heartfelt prayer for a happy ending... .

On the last day when the story ended, the whole gathering went into the sanctum and prostrated before the Goddess... .

By the time the next moon peeped over the hillock Nambi was ready with another story. He never repeated the same kind of story or brought in the same set of persons, and the village folk considered Nambi a sort of miracle, quoted his words of wisdom, and lived on the whole in an exalted plane of their own, though their life in all other respects was hard and drab.

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And yet it had gone on for years and years* And one moon he lit the lamp in the tree. The audience came. The old man took his seat and began the story. "... When King Vikramaditya lived, his minister was ..." He paused. He could not get beyond it. He made a fresh beginning.

" There was

the king ..." he said, repeated it, and then his words trailed off into a vague mumbling.

" What

has come over me ?

" he asked pathetically.

"

Oh,

Mother, great Mother, why do I stumble and falter ?

I know the story. I had the whole of it a moment ago. What was it about ? I can't understand what has happened ?

" He faltered and looked so miserable that his audience said,

" Take your own time. You

are perhaps tired."

" Shut up !

" he cried.

" Am I tired ? Wait a

moment ; I will tell you the story presently.”

Following this there was utter silence. Eager faces looked up at him. ” Don’t look at me !

” he flared

up. Somebody gave him a tumbler of milk. The audience waited patiently. This was a new experience.

Some persons expressed their sympathy aloud. Some persons began to talk among themselves. Those who sat in the outer edge of the crowd silently slipped away.

Gradually, as it neared midnight, others followed this example. Nambi sat staring at the ground, his head bowed in thought. For the first time he realized that he was old. He felt he would never more be able to control his thought or express them cogently. He looked up. Everyone had gone except his friend Man the blacksmith.

“

Man, why aren’t you also

gone?”

Mari apologized for the rest :

“

They didn’t want

to tire you ; so they have gone away “

UNDER THE BANYAN TREE \$27

Nambi got up.

” You arc right. Tomorrow I

will make it up. Age, age. What is my age? It has come on suddenly.” He

pointed at his head and said,

“

This says

‘ Old fool, don’t think I shall be your servant any more. You will be my servant hereafter.*

It is disobedient and treacherous.”

He lit the lamp in the niche next day. The crowd assembled under the banyan faithfully. Nambi had spent the whole day in meditation. He had been fervently praying to the Goddess not to desert him.

He began the story. He went on for an hour without a stop. He felt greatly relieved, so much so that he interrupted his narration to remark, “

Oh, friends.

The Mother is always kind. I was seized with a foolish fear ...” and continued the story. In a few minutes he felt dried up. He struggled hard : ” And

then ... and then ... what happened ?

” He

stammered. There followed a pause lasting an hour.

The audience rose without a word and went home.

The old man sat on the stone brooding till the cock crew.

“

I can’t blame them for it,” he muttered to himself.

” Can they sit down here and mope all night ?

” Two days later he gave another instalment of the story, and that, too, lasted only a few minutes.

The gathering dwindled. Fewer persons began to take notice of the lamp in the niche. Even these came only out of a sense of duty. Nambi realized that there was no use in prolonging the struggle. He brought the story to a speedy and premature end.

He realized what was happening. He was harrowed by the thoughts of his failure.

“

I should have been

happier if I had dropped dead years ago/

9 he said to

himself.

“

Mother, why have you struck me

dumb: . . ?

” He shut himself up in the sanctum, UNDER THE BANYAN TREE

hardly ate any food, and spent the greater part of the day sitting motionless in meditation.

The next moon peeped over the hillock, Nambi lit the lamp in the niche. The villagers as they returned home saw the lamp, but only a handful turned up at night.

” Where are the others ?

“

the old man asked.

“

Let us wait.” He waited. The moon came up.

His handful of audience waited patiently. And then the old man said,

“

I won’t tell the story today, nor tomorrow unless the whole village comes here. I insist upon it. It is a mighty story. Everyone must hear it.” Next day he went up and down the village street shouting,

“

I have a most wonderful tale to tell tonight. Come one and all ; don't miss it... .”

This personal appeal had a great effect. At night a large crowd gathered under the banyan. They were happy that the story-teller had regained his powers.

Nambi came out of the temple when everyone had settled and said :

“

It is the Mother who gives the

gifts ; and it is She*who takes away the gifts. Nambi is a dotard. He speaks when the Mother has anything to say. He is struck dumb when She has nothing to say. But what is the use of the jasmine when it has lost its scent ? What is the lamp for when all the oil is gone ? Goddess be thanked... . These are my last words on this earth ; and this is my greatest story.” sHe rose and went into the sanctum. His audience⁴ hardly understood what he meant. They sat there till they became weary. And then some of them got up and stepped into the sanctum. There the story-teller sat with his eyes shut.

“

Aren't you going

to tell us a story ?

“

they asked. He opened his eyes,

looked at them, and shook his head. He indicated by gesture that he had spoken his last words.

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When he felt hungry he walked into any cottage and silently sat down for food, and walked away the moment he had eaten. Beyond this he had hardly anything to demand of his fellow-beings. The rest of his life (he lived for a few more years) was one great consummate silence.